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HILLS AND PLAINS:

A VERY OLD STORY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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HILLS AND PLAINS:

A VERY OLD STORY.

CHAPTER I.

YOUTH AT THE PROW.

UNTIL some other story, equally veracious, began to circulate, the "Stapleton and young Mrs. Ochter" affair was much discussed in the Kilta and the Clive Arms. As first put forward by the elder Budlee, who had it from his son, it was sufficiently high-flavoured, weak people might fancy, for the most jaded palates; but, in truth, neither the uncommon simile of a "rolling snow-ball," nor the equally uncommon fable of the "Three black Crows," would be apt enough to typify the dimensions which the amusing little occurrence assumed after it had passed from mouth to mouth for a few days.

Stapleton's rage, I must acknowledge, was nearly equal to the occasion. Of course, no one attempted anything like a direct allusion to his doings, in his presence; the zest of all scandal would be lost, if this were done: but innuendoes there were in abundance. If he made a good "fluke" at billiards, it was followed by a dozen such remarks as, "Always a lucky fellow, that Stapleton!" "I wish I only got his chance." "Carries all before him at everything." If a married friend were playing with him, the bystander could torment him still more enjoyably, without giving him the smallest opening for remonstrance, under the pretence of praising his play. "Hilloa, Jones! this fellow Stapleton is trying his game on with *you*, is he? You haven't a chance, my boy. He goes in and wins before you know where you are. You look out, that's all." "We have been obliged to give up playing with him; a great deal too sharp a customer," &c. &c. He had to endure this for some days, but not very long. Another adventure occurred, and then his was forgotten.

I have not thought it necessary to inflict upon

the reader the particulars of his introduction at Beauclerc Cottage. As a friend of Henry's, he was quickly received into intimacy; and, as we have seen, his personal recommendations were rather above the average. Without once alluding to the subject, Mrs. Ochter junior and he felt that they had good reason for keeping somewhat aloof from each other. He had no doubt, from his club experiences, that young Budlee had recognized them, and that that officer had put the worst possible construction upon a very innocent matter; but my readers need not be told that it was entirely impossible for him to communicate his fears upon this point to Flora. He did not know what good reasons she had for suspecting, indeed for feeling confident, that they had been seen by Mr. Budlee; and he concluded that she had thought over the collar business, and had decided that she would allow no opportunity for repetition. He was a great deal more giddy than unprincipled, even if his religious feelings were all but nil. He could be led without difficulty into any amount of mischief, but he would not go first. As the truth

must be told, and as the personages whom I have the honour of presenting to the public are ordinary men and women, without a trace of ideality about them—poor, weak human beings, selfish and sinning, as we all are—I am horrified to discover myself in the middle of my story, without a virtuous hero or heroine to endow with all the “property” moralities and “stock” sentiment essential to such handiwork as mine. I feel somewhat relieved, after making this confession.

After a very few morning and evening rides, Stapleton, captain of Buffadars, and Miss Ochter found themselves very much gratified with each other's society. He was not long in discovering his own feelings, and he wisely resolved to keep them entirely in check. Poor moth that he was! he could not tear himself away from the flame. He would accompany the Beauclerc party in their rides, he would not deprive himself of the enjoyment of the society of a girl whom he felt himself daily becoming more and more in love with; but he would take care that no word should escape him, nor would he act in any way which could

possibly influence her, or lead her friends to suspect that he was daring enough to pay attention to such a goddess. Communing with himself, he used to laugh scornfully at the notion of his getting into love. "No such protection against a man's making a fool of himself as being 20,000 rupees to the wrong side of his banker's book. A fellow with No. 1, Chowringhee, and the loss of his commission before him, and anything but far off too, has something more serious to think of than such a sweet girl as that."

Spartan and sensible reflections these of Stapleton's were, but there was a slight difference between his principles and his practice. Desperately reckless and improvident so long as he could raise money by any possible expedient, he had now nearly run to the end of his tether. Duns from his tradespeople he utterly disregarded; and he had taken advantage to the utmost of the readiest way of putting a stop to their importunities,—namely, giving them fresh orders again and again, until they would supply no more. Notwithstanding incredible folly like this, he was a man of fair abilities and some

taste, yet averse to books, or to anything that could be called serious employment. Can Esther Ochter ever recover the good place I trust she holds in my readers' estimation, which she must lose on my revealing the fact that without ever giving the matter serious examination, without ever setting herself to inquire into his position in the world, and without further testimony about him than his talk, his looks, and his manners afforded,—she, the May Queen, the beauty of the season, did not fall,—for then there might be some excuse,—but coolly went into that state which represents love in the sex she belongs to, with a—captain of Buffadars!

She did not consult a soul; she did not even convict herself of this misdemeanor until a long time had elapsed. She was not made love to, even, in the usual way. He paid her no attention that he did not pay her sisters or sister-in-law; he had no long private conversations, by which he might have wheedled her heart out of her own keeping; he breathed no sighs, and assumed no expression of deep despair on gazing at her; in short, nothing can be urged in palliation of her sad downfall.

It only remains for me to mention that, within a very short time from their first introduction, Esther would have found it extremely painful to be asked to marry anybody but Captain Stapleton; and still more, she knew—how discovered, it is not for me to explain—that it was extremely unlikely that Captain Stapleton would ever marry any fair female but Esther Ochter, spinster to wit. Let it not be supposed that the above sentence hints at any verbal engagement or written promise; they simply understood each other's feelings thoroughly, by some delicate kind of intuition, which, I believe, exists in lovers only. I may be pronounced wrong, very wrong, on this point. The generally accepted notion is that a young fellow deep in love has no idea of the beloved object's feelings; that he must approach her with much trembling and palpitation, and, before he declares himself, entirely unconscious whether the beloved object has the slightest regard for him or not. This is far from being my creed on this highly important matter, and I have, I flatter myself, duly investigated it.

No young girl, at all worthy of adoration, can

so hide away and disguise her sentiments from the observant adorer as the above hypothesis supposes. According to the authorities, women are acknowledged to be particularly acute in discovering the first indications of "weakness" on the male side; but are the men so miserably obtuse, as not to be themselves able to discriminate similar indications on the female side? Experience is our grand instructor; and to judge positively, it would be necessary to have many faithful reports from people who have passed through the ordeal. Pity it is that such parties are so suspiciously reticent. "A True and Faithful History of our Courtship, by a newly married Couple," is the title of a book which would be of infinite service if impartially written. We hear every day of marriages consummated under the happiest auspices; why may not at least one couple so blessed come forward in the cause of suffering humanity, and delineate their mutual sensations accurately, *ab ovo usque ad malum*,—from the first glance to the final engagement.

Entirely unaided, then, by the commonly received lover-machinery, viz. conversations, beginning with

trivialities and ending in an ardent way; meetings, first accidental, afterwards arranged for with the deepest secrecy; whispers cautiously interchanged in ante-rooms and in verandahs during a ball, and in other such retired places, such as Horace, that old Roman flirt, calls *lenes sub noctem susurri*—without any such adjuvants did the hearts of Esther Ochter, spinster, and of Stapleton, captain of Buffadars, become inextricably entangled. Miss Gertrude, a very far-seeing young woman, and not at all unwise in her generation, may not have been entirely in the dark; but the ingenuous reader will, perhaps, remember how, in a chamber council of three, before mentioned, the discussion took a turn which very much embarrassed her, and which destroyed all her relish for investigating her sisters' movements afterwards.

Louisa and Esther had, immediately after the above council, a long and private talk, after which they found themselves driven to the conclusion — preposterous but possible — that their youngest sister—a child, as we have seen,—in all but years—had given away, before she appeared to be aware that she possessed one, that indispensable

organ which young people do often lose in the most unaccountable manner. Confirmation of this fact was subsequently obtained. Louisa suddenly awoke one night when the clock was striking two. She was astonished to see a carefully shaded light in the room, and to notice that Gerty's cot was vacant. Springing up alarmed, she rushed towards the light, and there, behind a screen, with Jock curled up at her little slippered feet, and clad in thin garments, which it would be profane to name, sat Gerty, blue with cold, embroidering, as fast as her chilled fingers would allow, a piece of altar vestiture which could only have one destination. The light was immediately extinguished, and poor Gerty led off to her cot by Louisa, who declined to receive any explanation at that hour. Next morning, after an hour's supplication, a promise of never so offending again having been tendered, Louisa engaged not to tell mamma; but she could not but decide, that she had never heard before of a girl's getting up at the dead hour of night to embroider church furniture under the influence solely of devotional feelings.

Louisa, who was as severe in her judgments as

Rhadamanthus, had a very harsh opinion of the Reverend Anselm Gregorian. He was charitable, and generous, and affable; but was he not at the same time, vain, and worldly, and lax? She preferred the Irish missionary: he was coarse and blustering, and vulgar, she acknowledged, but he was at least in earnest; and did he not spend his time in the towns and villages, striving for the conversion of the heathen, enduring much hardship and humiliation, while Mr. Gregorian chiefly employed himself in presiding at lady-meetings, which were all vanity; or in practising church music on cottage pianos, with a dozen ladies around him, which she believed to be no less than desecration? Could it be possible that dear little Gerty had allowed herself to become more attached than was correct to the chaplain? She would have preferred, she persuaded herself, to see her engaged to the Reverend Mortimer O'Moylan. Then she was a child still, and Mr. Gregorian old enough to be—no, not her father—but still there was a great disparity between their ages. Who ever heard of such a thing as the youngest girl in his flock almost becoming in love with the pastor?

Louisa, though given much to books, had, perhaps, never heard—to mention only one or two famous examples—of one Heloïse, niece of a canon Fulbert; nor of Mrs. Esther Johnson or Mrs. Hester Vanhomrigh. Her eldest sister, whom she consulted, advised that nothing should be said about the discovery; that, above all, the weak Gertrude herself should never be spoken to on the matter; that, it being more than likely that the Reverend Anselm was completely ignorant of the mischief he had done, there was a hope of Gerty's affection for him wearing itself out. Louisa, not naturally warm-hearted, loved her sisters more than she did herself; her morbid feelings generated no envy or jealousy of their gifts; shrinking and reserved herself, she thought it but proper that they should draw much admiration, while she should obtain none. Poor girl! she became day by day more and more a victim to her self-contempt. She could be induced, occasionally, to go out with Flora and her sisters in the morning, and she was known to Budlee and Stapleton; but she would not, beyond this, mingle with the outer world. She had condemned Budlee junior

from the first, and had often attacked her mother for not cutting off his communications with the Beauclerc family; but, as we have mentioned, that lady, confident of his doing her daughters no harm, persuaded by Esther not to hurt his feelings causelessly, and unwilling herself to hurt those of his father, had not interfered with him.

Stapleton, after much deliberation, Louisa thought might be tolerated. He often rode with her, when, content with being in Esther's neighbourhood, he was too much afraid of notice to accompany her exclusively. One strong reason for his caution was Mrs. Flora's sharpness: it was most important for him to retain her good-will; he guessed her influence in Beauclerc Cottage, and he knew that a word from her to her mother-in-law would suffice for his exclusion. If it should be asked, what grounds Stapleton had for supposing that Flora would object to his paying only the usual attention to the gentle Esther, I must pronounce myself not quite competent to explain; I can only give it as my opinion, that his surmise was perfectly reasonable. Often, then, on those days when Louisa was tempted out to join

them in their expeditions to Avoca, Dunblane, the Spin's Cascade, and other well-known places of romantic or picturesque resort, within the limits of Paharnauth, Louisa, Stapleton, and Gerty would hang together; while Mr. Budlee, whose attentions and anxieties knew no bounds, attended Esther and Flora, at whose hands he received such treatment as only ladies can inflict when they have not an iota of regard or pity for a wretched lover. For instance, Flora would suddenly stop, gaze for a moment down the most difficult part of the khud she could discover, and exclaim—

“There it is! the very thing we were talking about, Esther; I can make out its beautiful purple flower quite distinctly; I am sure it must be a kind of wild passion-flower. How I wish we could get it! Don't you, Esther?”

“I should like it of all things: I should send down one of the syces if the place were not too steep. I am afraid it would not be safe. What a pity!”

Such would be the wicked young person's answer. The miserable victim for whom the above sentences were intended looks over the precipice, feels very

much alarmed, declares that it is quite a trifle, and volunteers, of course, to go for the flower. They mingle entreaties that he may not expose himself to danger, with regrets that they cannot obtain the rare specimen,—several clusters of the same plant at the moment hanging from the bank by the roadside close by, as they well know! With a desperation worthy of Curtius, the victim lets himself cautiously down, amid brambles, stumps, huge stones, and masses of loose clay, and after a long struggle re-climbs, torn, scratched, breathless, and dirty, with the coveted flower, to find each of the ladies with one of the same kind in her hands, and both “so sorry” that he had taken so much trouble for nothing.

Flora could not be expected to love young Budlee; she felt certain that he had seen her at a time when, though quite innocently employed, she would much prefer he had not, and this made him of itself objectionable. What would she have thought of him if she only knew the tattered state her Paharnauth reputation was reduced to by his agency? It was not through any feeling of enmity to her, or to Stapleton, that he circulated the

story. He only did what ninety-nine out of a hundred would have done if similarly situated. The telling of a good story, or of a piece of news, and above all of scandalous news, gives the narrator a temporary consequence in the minds of his hearers, as is well known, which few would willingly forego. Mr. Budlee was certainly not one of the few.

It was very trying to Stapleton's patience to see his rival, whose character he knew, so sedulous in his attention to Esther, and conducting himself altogether as her cavalier; but he was comforted by the belief that no one could be more completely unacceptable to the young lady than Budlee.

Louisa's guarded approval of Stapleton was no small pleasure to Esther. Those who make it a habit to find fault with everybody, which is one of the easiest things in the world, generally succeed in obtaining a reputation for knowingness; and, better still, as their standard is pitched so high, they are thought, as a necessary consequence, to be themselves superior to the common run.

This does not quite apply to Louisa: she was cynical and prim, but at the same time clever and

discerning, and her severe judgments were not founded upon envy and a love of detraction, which are traits sure to be found in the characters of most people who systematically cry down their neighbours. Louisa remarked to her sister, that Captain Stapleton was clever and good-hearted; he had no principles worth mentioning, she thought, but then she rarely met a young man who had. From what he let drop she believed that he was extravagant and idle, and very much in debt; but then so are all Indian officers, she understood. In answer to a deeply-cunning suggestion from Esther, that all young men are very much alike, and that really she saw very little difference, except in features, between Messrs. Budlee and Stapleton, and the dozens of others she met at balls, Louisa said that she was very much mistaken, and that Mr. Budlee was not worthy to be compared to the Buffadar captain, and that she thought Esther was a great deal too sensible to confound them.

So Esther felt quite happy. The foolish girl set no thought upon Stapleton's reported extravagance and money difficulties. If Flora only guessed what

a large share of Esther's thoughts her husband's friend occupied, she could have enlightened her, no doubt, and possibly saved her much after trouble; but then Flora knew nothing about it.

Flora was not long in securing herself a very high place in her mother-in-law's opinion. She took such a matronly interest in the girls, expressed herself so anxious that they should be happily settled—giving this last word the same practical signification that Mrs. Ochter senior did; entered so heartily into all the elder lady's little schemes for bringing her daughters forward, that she could not but be grateful to her. Flora soon got to share all her hopes and fears about the girls' future. She was consulted about Louisa; and she very promptly declared, that Louisa was clever and obstinate, and that it would be better for the peace of all parties to let her have her own way: at the same time she did not disguise her fears, that Louisa would never do in India; and she all but recommended that she should return to aunt Sliegh's cottage at the first opportunity.

“But, my dear! how is she to live when I am

gone," inquired Mrs. Ochter senior, "and when my sister dies? We cannot last for ever."

These difficulties Flora passed over in silence, not thinking it expedient to mention how suitable she believed Louisa for the matronship of a blind asylum, or of an alms-house for decayed women. Flora did not like Louisa at all: she was too plain-spoken, almost rude at times.

"As for Esther," Flora said, "I know of only one person in Paharnauth at present at all worthy of her; and if what people say is true, he is very much struck with her."

"You don't mean ——?" said Mrs. Ochter senior eagerly.

"Mr. McCuddum," replied Flora; "I scarcely know him; but he is most highly spoken of everywhere."

"Indeed, he is," said Mrs. Ochter, despondingly; "but though, as you know, he has called here, and has since paid particular attention to Esther at different parties where they met, I am very much afraid that Esther is almost careless about him."

"You don't say so! Are you quite sure?"

"Very nearly, my dear. I tried to speak to her about him once or twice, but she begged me not, and then burst into tears; and you know I cannot bear to pain her."

"Well, really! I think our dear Esther," said Flora, "should be a little more attentive to your wishes; I know I would not have thought of opposing *my* darling mother. Would you wish me to speak to her about it? I may be able to persuade her to think better."

"You and she are so constantly together, Flora, and she thinks so highly of you, you might have some influence with her. Besides, you are so nearly of the same age, she might listen to you in a matter like this more readily than to me. Only yesterday Mrs. Neem told me that she heard Mrs. Russud say, when they were calling together at Mrs. Cham Bayley's, that she was sure Mr. McCuddum would marry before he left Paharnauth. Then Mrs. Cham Bayley asked Mrs. Russud, had she any idea who it was likely to be, and Mrs. Russud immediately said, 'Miss Ochter.' You know Mr. McCuddum is

staying at the Larch Runs. This means something, depend upon it."

"Indeed it does," said Flora; "and we must argue Esther, if we can, out of her objections. She says he is a perfect fright, and that it would be impossible to endure him!"

"I know—I know. Isn't it enough to try any one's patience!" said poor Mrs. Ochter, wringing her hands. "I never heard anything like it. Such a clever man too! he could be of so much use in helping Henry on. What can we do? it would break my heart to be harsh with her. Do advise me, Flora!"

Mrs. Ochter senior somewhat exaggerated her fears about Esther's antipathy to Mr. McCuddum, probably with the hope of thereby enlisting Flora's sympathies more warmly upon her own side. We, however, are sufficiently acquainted with that young matron's policy to feel sure that she would second her mother-in-law. She could not realize to herself any girl's rejecting such an offer. "He is odious to be sure, and a fright, as Esther says; but what a trifle that is compared with the position she will get!

besides, she could lead him exactly as she pleased, and that is well worth considering. Oh! she must marry him." So Flora thought and determined. Having before sufficiently eulogized the sound good sense which characterized all Flora's views upon the marriage question, I need not recur to it again.

Poor Esther's old-fashioned ideas required much remodelling; and she was, fortunately for herself no doubt, placed in the hands of a first-rate modern artist. Hitherto she always managed to silence her mother by declaring, that she could not for a moment believe that because she met a gentleman a few times at her own-and others' houses, and exchanged a few words of question and answer with him, he was to be set down as paying her attention, and she was to prepare herself for a proposal from him.

"What in the world makes you fancy, mamma, that I stand first on Mr. McCuddum's list? He has never said a word in my presence, I assure you, which could make me think that I am more to him than any one else. Why," she continued, with the most marvellous hypocrisy, "do you not

expect a declaration from Mr. Budlee or Captain Stapleton? Are they not with us every day, and paying the greatest attention? How is it that you expect nothing from these gentlemen? I expect every day an offer of Mr. Budlee's heart; and who knows whether I may not be honoured by Captain Stapleton too?" and she tossed her Madonna head scornfully. "What answer do you wish me to give them, mamma?"

"You may have a secret attachment, hid from your poor mother, Esther," said the innocent Mrs. Ochter in her most cutting tones, but at the same time convinced of its impossibility; she little knew, good lady, how very nearly, to use the classic language of Henry the Eighth (the pride of England next after George the Fourth), she had the right sow by the ear, then. "But no, my dear," she added, forgivingly, "I know you too well to suspect that!" Esther felt something like a shudder when her mother followed up these trustful words by a fond kiss. "Now promise me, my darling," she went on, "not to think so hardly of Mr. McCuddum."

"Indeed, mamma, I do not think hardly of him, or of any one else I scarcely know. Am I to make up my mind to marry him if he gives me the chance, without knowing whether he cares for me or I for him?" said Esther, flushing up into an attitude of decided resistance. "Is this the rule in India? You first hear stupid stories of what happened at Mrs. Posteen's, and then, because Mrs. Somebody mentions to Mrs. Otherbody, that Mrs. Nobody told her that this fright of a man intends to marry, you decide at once that I—I—I never heard anything so cruel in—all—my—life."

Poor Esther's speech was broken, and its continuity lost, in a series of sobs, culminating in a long cry, a splitting headache, and voluntary confinement in her bed-room. Mrs. Ochter could not believe this opposition of Esther's serious, though she represented it as such to her daughter-in-law. She assigned it partly to maiden-modesty of the old-fashioned sort, and partly to an unwillingness, pardonable enough, on Esther's side, to express any preference for a gentleman whose regard for her was only known on doubtful hearsay evidence.

Many and many a time the prudent mother held forth to her daughters, giving them the benefit of all her experience, and putting endless examples before them upon the all-engrossing subject. As she was a sensible, and not over-worldly woman, her lessons were, it must be said, wholesome and sound. "A man was not to be married," so ran one of her postulates, "because he had money and position, unless you felt at least respect for him; but no man without money and position should be allowed to engage your affections. If a girl makes this resolve firmly, she cannot be unhappy."

Mrs. Ochter's lectures and reasonings had the common defect of all elderly teaching. No allowance is ever made on the score of hot youth. The aged entirely forget the feelings, and the aspirings, and the weaknesses of their younger days; and they have no patience when their sons and daughters display them.

The sire who five-and-thirty years before married the girl of his heart against the consent and to the great displeasure of his parents and friends, will, when his son does the same, most certainly turn

him out of doors and cut him off with a shilling. The old charger will cock his ears, and toss his head at the sound of a trumpet; the worn-out hunter in a paddock will rush to the fence when he hears the pack passing in full cry;—but no stimulus will revive in Senilis the sympathies, the generous feelings and views, of hopeful, open-hearted youth.

As years advance, body and mind alter *pari passu*; but, while nobody can conceal from himself the degeneration of the former, few acknowledge or are aware that the latter, the more important element, also as certainly deteriorates. Shameful plagiarism all this, some one says, from one John Locke, gent.:—you are quite right, sir, but it is not the less true on that account. However if, by some simple process, fathers and mothers could, when wilful children act directly contrary to their wishes, force themselves to believe, or rather to remember, that there was surely a time in their own lives, no matter how many years back, when under similar circumstances they would have thought, and felt, and acted exactly as their

children do now, how much less heart-breaking and sorrowful would be this world we live in!

Mrs. Ochter *mère* was no philosopher: she thought and acted for the best, according to her ideas; so that, when endeavouring to instil the safest principles into the minds of her children, it would be too much to expect her to recollect that at a former period she would not have given up Cadet Ochter, when hardly out of "the Greens" at Lettucecombe, for the wealthiest of sugar-boilers or tallow-factors, even had her beloved parents prayed her to do so on their knees.

People not sufficiently well acquainted with Paharnauth sayings and doings, may feel surprised at Flora's holding so high a place in the esteem of Mrs. Ochter and daughters, when so many shocking and circumstantial accounts of her were in circulation. Surely, I shall be told, some of them must have reached the chaste ears of Beauclerc Cottage, and there caused dismay unspeakable. Not one. An essential quality of genuine unadulterated scandal is its power of shunning the ears of those who could, in the vast majority of cases,

destroy its existence by a word. In plain English, scandal disproved becomes of course a lie; and therefore scandal, which, as such, tickles so many delicate ears and glides over so many gentle tongues, avoids, as long as possible, the chance of undergoing such a vulgar metamorphosis.

But do you mean to assert, I am again asked, that Flora was not "black-balled" generally by the Paharnauth ladies—that she was courteously received in society; that she was not "cut" and treated as every woman is, who is no better than she should be? Of course I assert it. If she were a spotless Peri, newly arrived from Paradise, she could not have been on better terms than she was with the most strait-laced Cornelias and Lucretias to be found, and they were extremely numerous in Paharnauth.

No ball, party, picnic, concert, or other polite gathering was complete without her; she was first contralto in the choir—a place accorded to her with more reference to her social status than to her vocal abilities, as she used to prove clearly, Sabbath after Sabbath.

At the first fancy ball of the season she appeared, without regard to their rather dissimilar styles, in the early part of the evening as Mary Queen of Scots, and afterwards as Queen Elizabeth; and did full justice to both characters, as was universally acknowledged. All that was wanted to make the thing complete, as that sting-tongued, perking little Mrs. Cummer said, was, that Captain S. should appear as David Rizzio, or better still, as Bothwell, in attendance upon her in the first character, and as Essex or Leicester in the second; but nobody minded Mrs. Cummer. Flora was welcome everywhere, and went everywhere, the gayest of the gay, dancing and smiling, and innocent-looking as the rest. Next comes the question: If she really was so bad, or if people believed her to be so bad, why was she not branded at once, and thrust forth from the company of the virtuous and the pure? Why did not the ladies, fearing contamination, avoid her carefully? Would it not have been quite as kind, and a great deal more consistent, than receiving her openly, and condemning her secretly, as they did? Why did the gentlemen court her society

rather more than that of the Cornelias and Lucretias —ladies of the severest virtue, and boasting of reputation, snowy and spotless as an infant's? I don't know, really! Perhaps it was out of charity and pity; or perhaps, as you say, my dear Mrs. Lota, there may have been a little difficulty about "the first stone:" but it is very cruel of you to say so.

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER ARDENT LOVER.

HAVING, in the earlier part of this chronicle, fully entered into the history and symptoms of the disease from which Mr. Henry Lony Ochter suffered after he was knocked down, so to speak, by a love-stroke, I may be excused from bringing forward another case of this melancholy "affection." My readers, however, must be informed that a very decided change took place in Mr. McCuddum's manners and deportment shortly after his visits to Medmenham Towers and Beauclerc Cottage: he presented himself, it is true, at very many other houses, under the guidance of his friends Mr. and Mrs. Russud; but he soon got tired of the work. He did not, when this his last occupation was gone, make any demonstration of dulness or want of employment; nor did he say a word about

going back to the Momjamma Secretariat. To ordinary observers he would appear to lead a most miserable life. He could not be got to enter the Kilta, or join in any of the manly sports and exercises proposed by old Clem; but he persuaded the Judge that he could get on very well upon his own resources, and induced him not to deny himself his usual amusements on his (McCuddum's) account.

The latter certainly became brisk and lively, and never missed the Mall, where he appeared every evening, and in the finest garments Messrs. Keench and Muttee, the highly-fashionable tailors (and outfitters) of Paharnauth, could provide for him. No raiment could improve his appearance much; but he didn't know that, any more than other infatuated swains who run up heavy tailors' bills to as little purpose. Nobody believes "that fine feathers make fine birds;" though most men and women act as if they did. And why should we not believe it? It is sound doctrine. What frights seven-eighths of us would be, if unadorned! How many of our beauteous women would appear to advantage, say in the garb of a Roman vestal, or in the scanty skirts of Penthesilea?

Then the senseless outcry that is made against improvements by the undiscerning! Who does not remember the clamour raised because bonnets were made to cover only the back of the head, instead of being allowed to come forward far beyond the face, like the elongated coal-scuttles of the last George and William's reign? A glance is enough to prove that bonnets which allow the wearer's face to be seen, without looking down a tube, are the most becoming; which is all that's wanted. We know that bonnets are simply for ornament; and the man who says they were originally intended to protect the head, knows nothing about it. Stays, again, according to the doctors, restrain the free action of the body, compress the vitals, and shorten the wearer's days: an opinion which ugly women find pleasure in adopting. But what rank nonsense all this is! Even suppose one woman out of a million killed by tight-lacing, is it not more for the benefit of humanity that this small sacrifice should be made, than that all the rest should waddle about like walking pillows, and be a constant eyesore to their lords? Crinoline has also been shamefully cried

down: yet there is no recent invention for which both sexes should be more grateful to science.

It will be noticed that my positive statements apply to the vestiture of women. Now, with men it is very different. Woman's main business in this world is to look well; and she is justified, accordingly, in making as fine a display as she can; but who cares how a man looks after himself? This brings me back to Mr. McCuddum, from whom I have been running away at a fine rate. When you observe a man on the very shady side of thirty, and previously not over particular as to his appearance, taking suddenly to French boots, nervous neck-ties (so called from the effect his anxiety about their "set" has upon the brain of the wearer), well-cut coats, &c., you may feel confident there is something wrong with him.

This did Mr. McCuddum do, and the Larch Run folk noticed it, and wondered. They could not well avoid noticing it, for the change was very striking from rusty sombre garments to the most fashionable dress of those days. His conversation changed too: at first, after his arrival, he could talk little but "shop" (and any one who has heard civilian "shop"

will agree with me in testifying to its oppressive nature); and if he addressed himself to Mrs. Russud at all, it was to elucidate some point which she declared her ignorance of, but pretended to be interested in, as part of her duty as hostess. Yet now he became quite sprightly, talking freely to Mrs. Russud about the ladies he encountered; and he who, as that lady remarked, could not look a person (feminine, she meant) in the face without blushing and stammering, now actually criticized features, and figures, and feet, and hair, and dresses, as boldly as anybody.

Mrs. Russud was not long in discovering the *origo mali*. She heard of Esther's hat adventure with him. She heard from her husband that Mr. McCuddum had inquired, when they left Medmenham Towers, into such particulars as he could afford him of the same Esther. Add to this his eagerness to visit with her at the identical young lady's home, and we must agree that she was justified in concluding that a decided impression had been produced. Mr. McCuddum's calls were followed up, as is usual in hospitable India, by a shower of pink and

yellow notes, variously shaped, sized and scented, inviting his attendance at many fashionable marts—I mean drawing and ball rooms—where young and gushing beauties were exposed for sale, and knocked down to the highest bidder, “terms cash ;” that is, they were assembled only to dance, and sing, and be happy. Having neglected saltatory science in his youth, and feeling that he was not adapted to shine in society, Mr. McCuddum should have declined these polite solicitations ; but he didn’t. He came to all ; and underwent the wallflower process, evening after evening, with wonderful resignation.

Miss Ochter, like every other marketable creature at the station, never missed one ; and being, as I have often mentioned, the fairest of the Paharnauth fair, she was greatly run upon. Although we have heard her impetuously denying to her mother that there were any grounds for the hopes the latter cherished, Esther felt decidedly uneasy. She noticed indisputable demonstrations on Mr. McCuddum’s part, which she could not ignore, in her own reflections upon his proceedings ; they were such as might have been expected from a man of a not very ardent tem-

perament struggling between *mauvaise honte* and an anxiety to make his admiration, if not a stronger feeling, manifest.

At first, he contented himself with merely moving once or twice during an evening from his fixed-star position, and walking past her seat with a slight bow; this signal answered, he nailed himself to the wall again, happy. Esther could not object to this, nor could she make any very alarming deductions from it. True, she was the only girl in the room so honoured; but then the poor man may not have known any one else! The young fellows of the assembly, Admirable Crichtons to a man in their own estimation, who never missed a dance, and who were excessively witty and agreeable to their partners, ridiculed McCuddum from one end of the evening to the other. The young ladies were much amused, and simpered, and giggled, when those handsome fellows, in various liveries of red or blue, of gold or silver, begged of them to "look at the owl" (who was seen to blink twice), "the crooked lamp-post with a death's head at the top," "the waiter discharged for ugliness or awkwardness," or

improvised a dozen other similes, full of wit and sarcasm, for the abasement of the talented secretary.

You are very vivacious and fascinating, Caunta, my boy, and your moustache, and back-hair, and spurs, and shoulder-knots—I beg your pardon, epaulettes—are most killing too; and pretty Amy, Mr. Cham Bayley's sweetest daughter, is no doubt quite in love with you; but suppose that wretched devil McCuddum were to shamle up, and bow to Amy, just as he has done to Miss Ochter, what would become of you then? Well, it never occurs to you to think—so dance away, old fellow! and fall in love if you like, and get up a good appetite for second supper; but do try and have a little respect for your betters when you see them: they may look very coarse crockery side by side with such a superb piece of Sèvres porcelain as you are, but they contain a great deal more, and all the women know it; and I need not tell a sensible man like you which they would choose if both were offered.

Mr. McCuddum became bolder by degrees. How proud he was of his achievement the first time he crept round under the wall shades to Esther's chair,

in one of the 'tween-dance intervals, and managed to say to her, "Good evening, Miss Ochter," at the same time thrusting forward a quivering hand, which having been touched, he crept back again! Flora, sitting beside her at the time, whispered, "Surely that means something;" to which Esther answered, "Don't, don't, please, dear Flora!" in a beseeching tone, and felt grateful to Mr. Budlee for coming up at the moment and carrying her off to fulfil a three-weeks-old engagement with him.

Mr. McCuddum called again at Beauclerc Cottage, which was very trying for all concerned. He waylaid Mrs. Ochter and her daughter on the Mall, and accompanied them for the evening on more than one occasion. Mrs. Ochter was filled with pride and joy at this public manifestation, and said to the girls afterwards that she had seldom met one who pleased her so much after a short acquaintance as Mr. McCuddum. Poor Esther could only pretend not to hear.

Things at length became serious: at a grand entertainment given by the mounted officers, the largest assemblage of the rank and beauty of the season, the owl, whose every movement was jealously watched,

was seen to move from the wall at a very early hour, walk boldly, almost rudely, across the room, and approach Miss Ochter, who was sitting a little apart from her mother. He commenced a conversation, an actual conversation—wished to carry her off for refreshments, which she declined, to the anguish of Mrs. Ochter, who looked, *arrectis auribus*, in another direction—regretted he could not dance—contrasted the present ball with the preceding one given by the infantry, to the disadvantage of the latter—hoped the coming civilian ball would outshine both—said how happy he would be to do her brother any service in his power—and so on, until Esther thought of sending him off to fetch some lemonade.

His altered demeanour made her tremble to think that he might have come to some secret understanding with her mother. Esther knew, too, that mamma took it for granted that her girls would marry only the person she recommended. This was the view, as I have before told the reader, which the sagacious lady took of their promise not to marry without her consent. What if Mr. McCuddum had asked and obtained her permission to pay his addresses to her

eldest daughter! In the virtuous romances Esther read, this was a very common preliminary arrangement. She felt very downcast indeed when some one or other came to claim her as a partner before Mr. McCuddum returned. When he did come back, floundering along with the lemonade she pretended to want, she could not refrain from a sorrowful smile (*δακρυσέν γέλασμα*) at seeing him knocking about in every direction in search of her, going up to groups of girls and peering into their faces. He caused great amusement, and attracted a great deal of attention, for he forgot all his timidity, and asked people who were even strangers to him where he could find Miss Ochter. He managed to come up with her at last, and she was obliged to sip lemonade, with every eye in the room fixed upon her and her antiquated Ganymede. She was sneered at by the young married women, and envied by the aged ones and the maidens; the knowing ones said in the hearing of her mother,—“Oh, they must be engaged!” and she returned home that night the happiest of middle-aged matrons, though she did not say a word to Esther about the events of the evening.

Mr. Budlee was, of course, at the ball, and so was his father; the latter came for a rubber, for a chat with old friends, including Mrs. Ochter, and for a titbit of supper afterwards; the son to dance with Esther as often as he could, and to pay her such little attentions as he believed himself entitled to pay as a favoured admirer. He did not hide his love; he did not care how many people knew it. Because he was not treated with absolute rudeness by Esther, he felt convinced that he was making way to win her heart. His father, who was well aware that his son could not be considered worthy of such a prize, wondered to himself why Mrs. Ochter did not request Master Ned to discontinue his attentions.

"He's a smart sort of fellow and very good-looking; but if the girl should become attached to him, won't there be the deuce of a row!"

Colonel Budlee once or twice attempted, in the fullness of his paternal affection for his son, to persuade him to give up so hopeless a chase: but the young gentleman retorted upon his sire rather savagely. When Mr. McCuddum was hunting about for Esther, Budlee junior got himself into a rage,

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and talked quite loudly about the offensive conduct of that gentleman. He moved about from one party to another, denouncing him; and at last came upon Flora: who, perhaps because she thought no notice could be taken in a ball-room, or because it was a long time since she had had a chat with Captain Stapleton alone, was then talking to this last-named officer in a quiet corner.

"You appear rather excited, Mr. Budlee," said Flora. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing! Has Miss Ochter's slave been to you."

"What do you mean?"

"You know that handsome and polished civilian, whom all the young ladies admire so?"

"Don't be severe, Budlee," said Stapleton. "He means Mr. McCuddum, Mrs. Ochter. How do you make him out Miss Ochter's slave?"

"Why, he has been rushing about the room with refreshments, making no end of a row, and calling out for Miss Ochter. Never saw such a brute in my life! Must be drunk, I think."

Now Flora, who carefully watched the course of

events, had made up her mind that Mr. McCuddum was nearly certain to offer himself to Esther, and was equally certain of being accepted. "For she will do whatever mamma tells her; and, though she pretends to dislike him now, it will be very different when he actually proposes," thought Flora. She did not, therefore, think it creditable or right that Mr. Budlee should wander about, foaming and blustering against Mr. McCuddum; it might have a bad effect, as Mr. Budlee was known to be rather intimate at Beaclerc Cottage. Of course Flora knew that Mr. Budlee was deep in love with Esther; and this she considered a gross piece of impertinence upon his part. As to the other gentleman close by, Captain Stapleton, she, for reasons best known to herself, was far from suspecting that he thought more warmly than was proper of Esther. In an evil moment it occurred to her that it would be expedient to undeceive Mr. Budlee.

"Pray, take care, Mr. Budlee! you are getting on dangerous ground."

"How so, Mrs. Ochter? I do not think he has the slightest right to annoy Miss Ochter in this way

in public; and I am strongly tempted to tell him so," said Budlee.

Stapleton thought Mrs. Flora's warning exceedingly mysterious.

"How do you know? Are you in Esther's confidence?" asked Flora, in rather a sharp tone. The question itself was rather cutting to a well-received admirer, as he believed himself to be.

In the anxiety which her words excited within him, he disregarded the stinging part of Flora's question. Stapleton was very busy re-arranging a bouquet of the lady's, but he felt a sudden weight on his heart too.

"No, I am not," said Budlee; "but if I were ——"

"You might have less reason for talking so very strangely about Mr. McCuddum. It is well that Esther does not hear you."

"Forewarned, forearmed, Budlee," said Stapleton, with a desperate attempt at a smile; he felt himself driven to say something.

"Oh! you are not serious, Mrs. Ochter. I heard her say myself that she did not think she had ever

seen—a less prepossessing animal I think she called him—than this very Mr. McCuddum,” said Budlee; “you must have heard her say it too, Stapleton!”

“You shouldn’t attach too much importance, my dear fellow, to anything young ladies say. Come, tell us, Mrs. Ochter; you have some secret I know,” said Stapleton, ready to bear anything, as he thought.

“I can only tell you what I suspect,” replied Flora, cruelly ignoring the presence of an avowed champion of Esther’s. “I should not wonder if this Mr. McCuddum were to propose for Miss Ochter.”

“Looks very like it,” said Budlee, confidently, seeing nothing detrimental to his own interest in that.

“And I shouldn’t wonder,” continued Flora, “if he were to be accepted.”

“Oh! this is d——d nonsense,” said Budlee, passionately.

There was no excuse for such forgetfulness on Mr. Budlee’s part; but in receiving such a death-

blow as Flora gave him, he could not smile and thank her. She was much to blame in communicating to a mere intimate, like Mr. Budlee, a family matter which should have been kept concealed. She was impelled to do so partly by the praiseworthy motives we have seen above, and partly by an anxiety to take him down. She acted very foolishly.

When Mr. Budlee gave utterance to the above strong language, Flora turned to Stapleton. It was a movement that expressed, "Will you permit me to be insulted in this way?" Stapleton, who was himself stunned by her announcement, fortunately recovered his self-possession in time to save his own precious secret from the acute Flora. He heard what Budlee said, and was astonished at it, but not as much as he would have been if Flora's statement had not deadened his sensibilities. He was not, in any case, inclined to quarrel with such a *bête noire* as Budlee, and certainly not on Flora's account. He stood up and coolly said,—

"Mr. Budlee, you appear to forget yourself. Will you take my arm, Mrs. Ochter?"

Flora coldly, but trembling a good deal, answered—
“Thank you. We had better go,” and they moved away together.

She may have expected a much warmer demonstration on Stapleton's part; she may have thought that such atrocious language addressed directly to her ought not to have been passed over so lightly by a gentleman who, to all outward appearance, was a great admirer of hers; and she may have felt that, if her husband had been by, the offender would have had sufficient cause to repent. However, she only said to Stapleton, “Pray, say nothing of what has occurred;” and when they found her mother-in-law, the latter lady was in too high a state of exultation to notice any agitation in Flora's countenance. Budlee, amid many non-producible expletives, and being not at all sure that Mrs. Flora's statement was not an invention of hers and Stapleton's, made purposely to irritate him, muttered to himself, “Devilish easy to punish you both for this little joke. I have no doubt you are much closer friends now than when I caught you the first time.” It did not occur to Mr. Budlee to remember, that when he did “catch

them the first time," he gave a very different version of the affair from what he knew to be the truth.

Stapleton saw no reason to doubt what Flora said; so he returned home a much more downcast and miserable being than he ever felt himself before. His magnanimous resolution to crush out of his soul every idea or thought which tended in the least degree towards Esther, had insensibly melted away. He was not Spartan enough for the struggle. Not but that he constantly ridiculed and abused himself, to himself, for such piteous folly, compared to which he pronounced suicide much more commendable:—with absolute ruin and degradation staring him in the face, to allow himself to feel miserable because a beautiful girl, to whom he had as much title to aspire as to the crown of England, was going to become the wife of a man every way entitled to be her husband! Such an intense delusion was that of his, too, which he had given way to about Esther, in persuading himself that there were some signs of her preference for him. He was, upon his soul! nearly as great an ass as Budlee; except that he did not run about braying and kicking up his heels about

her. The wind-up of Captain Stapleton's murmurings, thus roughly sketched, was a solemn vow to avoid Beauclerc Cottage in future, and to return to his former loves, cards and billiards, until his "bubble burst." Of course Flora would cut him of her own accord for ever, after his tolerance of Budlee that night.

"I suppose she wanted me to kick him out of the room, and then wouldn't the talk all over the station be something delicious!" he muttered; "but there has been plenty of that, thank you, ma'am! all about nothing."

His admiration for Flora evaporated under the pressure of the first scandal; or, more probably, the seeing and knowing Esther had saved him from carrying it on. Flora, watchful as she was, did not dream that he had deserted her standard, until she had time to reflect over the events of the night, and then the true cause of his apathy beamed upon her.

The hearts of women being inscrutable, I have not attempted to dissect Flora's, for which neglect perhaps my readers will forgive me. I have endeavoured to show them pretty accurately the relations

existing between Captain Stapleton and Mrs. Flora, and they must judge how far her conduct was blameable; as to their intimacy, Paharnauth had but one opinion, one entirely and cruelly wrong, which was rather strengthened than otherwise by their avoidance of each other in public; for, though Stapleton was constantly with the Beauclerc party, he was never seen in attendance upon Flora alone. She, believing that he was wise in so doing, and shrinking from public opinion, as the boldest women will, never suspected that her *quondam* admirer was neglecting her.

Woman is a patient animal; she will subsist upon a glance for a fortnight. While Stapleton was slowly yielding (though, in his own opinion, resisting stoutly) to the *filia pulchrior*, poor Flora fondly believed that he was as great a friend of hers as ever. Having made the sad reverse discovery, a storm of the most conflicting feelings whirled through her bosom for a time; but not for long. Hers was a resolute temperament. Hate, bitter and furious, towards poor Esther, blazed up first, as might be expected; but this soon subsided—it was too unreasonable to last

long ; then came loud self-accusation, and possibly regret, much lightened by a feeling of thankfulness that she had done no irreparable wrong ; and, last of all, she was soothed by the conviction that there was at least one whose affection for her was beyond question. Let us hope that a small portion of the tedious, sleepless night was devoted to his claims, that more wifely and warm feelings towards him may have sprung into existence, and that the Dead Sea apple she was obliged to taste may not have been all dust and bitterness.

A violent animosity towards Stapleton and Budlee, much stronger against the former, reached full maturity, like the fairy tree, in this one night ; and she determined that her aid should not be wanting to push on Esther's marriage with Mr. McCuddum as fast as possible. She felt that it was very easy indeed to secure Captain Stapleton's exclusion from Beauclerc Cottage for evermore ; she was more indifferent about Budlee. She, of course, settled it to be her first task to ascertain whether Stapleton had secured any place in Esther's affections ; in this she expected to meet no difficulty. She had cut out a

fair supply of work for herself that morning before sleep came to her.

But to return to the most important character in this chapter, Mr. Hastings McCuddum. Was the *vox populi* right or wrong in declaring that he was so deeply smitten? Was he really so far committed as to be on the verge of a declaration? Reasoning, sensible people will tell me that he really was not, or that I have done my duty as chronicler of such important events very badly; because it is utterly impossible that Mr. McCuddum could have got himself into a fit state for a proposal only by going through such a series of manœuvres as those I have briefly described. Unto them I respond that, as water boils at different temperatures at different elevations, even so doth love vary as to its boiling-over point in different temperaments: and, to cut short too scientific a parallel, Mr. McCuddum's boiling-over point was very low; and when other people might pronounce him only lukewarm, his point had reached its utmost. It may be the rule with men of very bashful dispositions, and women may know all about it, wise beings that they are! and hence their positive

opinions of Mr. McCuddum's condition, when obtuse men believed that he was only making a greater owl of himself than usual.

Yes! Mr McCuddum had satisfied himself that he must marry. He knew that, as a general rule, handsome women were preferable to plain ones; he saw and was told that Miss Ochter was the handsomest woman at his command, and he determined to have her. A bashful man is not necessarily an humble man; and the secretary of the great Momjamma Board, who knew himself to be the corner-stone—yea, the very key-stone of the institution—could not be expected to be humble. If he believed them essential to his success, the boldness, the art of chattering to the sex, the skill in flirting and dancing, possessed by scores of the military, might have excited his envy; but he thought rightly that one of his eminence required no such adjuvants. He felt his weakness, but he believed that he could get on very well in spite of it.

How he paid his suit has been briefly told. On the cavalry ball night he had reached his boiling-point: he may have investigated his own feelings;

he may have persuaded himself, like ardent lovers in general, that he could not live happy unless Esther became his; but it is pretty certain that *her* opinion on the subject gave him no anxiety. Very many men in his condition are deluded by the insidious affability of ladies in society, arising, as well from genuine kindness of heart, as from that desire to produce a pleasing effect which is common to them all. This was young Budlee's case.

Mr. McCuddum may have been carried along by that fact, but he was also made easy in his mind by the ill-advised though well-meant tactics of Mrs. Ochter senior. The impression she managed to convey to him was, that such trifling attentions and marks of notice as were conferred from time to time by him upon her eldest daughter were extremely grateful to that young lady. She represented herself as having heard from Esther what Mr. McCuddum did and said to her on each occasion, and she showed how Esther remembered it all. Treacherous work this, Mrs. Ochter! but the matron had set her heart on Mr. McCuddum, and a point must be stretched to secure him.

Esther was told nothing of what her good mother was committing her to. To put a stop to discourse from her, and arguments with Flora, Esther one day rashly declared that she liked Mr. McCuddum much better then, than when she saw him first. This most wanton assertion of the poor girl justified Mrs. Ochter to herself for much that she did with a view to bring about the desired end, which cannot be detailed here. Suffice to say that Mr. McCuddum was taken captive, and that on the day after the cavalry ball he went boldly to Beauclerc Cottage, and "popped."

CHAPTER III.

TÉNÈBRES.

To a man of a gregarious, laughter-loving, thought-hating disposition, not burdened with a love for books or any special desire for study, solitude is very painful; and so our almost forgotten hero, Mr. Henry Lony Ochter, found it, when, a few weeks after their marriage, his wife was compelled to leave him, and betake herself to the *tierra fria*. It will be remembered, I hope, how difficult he found it to induce her to leave the *tierra caliente*, even after Dr. Huddee, the civil surgeon, certified to its being impossible for her to remain there with safety, and how sorry Flora was to leave her husband.

Left alone, he found it very hard to reconcile himself to a revival of his bachelor existence. The few weeks' domestication he had passed through had so altered him, that now he believed he could not

be happy without his wife's company. He did not enjoy his meals; and his after-dinner doze, which used to steal over him so pleasantly when Flora sat by, reading aloud, never came near him. He worked fiercely at Cutcherry, and was happier in his close stifling court-room than at any other time; but he felt the void all the more keenly in his desolate house. There was little society in Chillumpore. He found it almost necessary to cut the Skewbalds, for the major began to frequent his house and borrow his horses most unpleasantly, and going to their happy home was a punishment to him.

The jolly Buffadars, to be sure, wanted him to renew his honorary membership of their mess while Mrs. Ochter was away, but he declined with thanks. He probably supposed his dining out every night would be an act of desecration to his household gods; again, it was requisite for him to live with great economy. As a sort of pin-money, for she had no other expenses, he had promised to send his wife monthly nearly a fifth part of his income. Her taste in millinery was varied, and she said she

did not like running up bills for trifles. Before she left, she said, over and over, that she would not hear of his sending it unless he could do so without the least inconvenience; but one time, when he had omitted it under pressure from without, a post-script to one of the daily letters—those inestimable pledges, peculiar to India, of love that never dies—reminded her darling Henry of the fact. His dreariness and tendency to low spirits, never shown before, may have been added to very much by *res angustæ*. The Mehnrbanee Bank became very harsh in its dealings with him. The expenses of setting up, small as they were in his case, so cut his salary up, that his instalments got very much into arrears, and the manager dunned him systematically for the deficit.

By himself in the evening, he used to conjure up all sorts of dismal images of arrests, and disgrace with the higher authorities, as a consequence of his embarrassment, though he could not but have remembered that very many of his Calcutta contemporaries were in the same predicament as himself; and yet whenever he saw or heard of them they

were in the highest possible spirits, and their invariable advice was to "tell the manager to go to the devil;" or, should that plan not suit, then "go to the Mahajuns, borrow a 'pot' from them, and pay off the Bank fellows. The natives will make more out of you in the end, but they don't dun, and that is saying a great deal for them."

Solitude made Lony Ochter's spirits low. He paid his wife the compliment of believing firmly that it was the deprivation of her company which depressed him; but there he was wrong. If he only had the sense to go to the mess every evening, and talk "liquor" with Burton, or "horse" with Charlie Haupper and young Sims—nay, even sit there in silence and listen to Surruk's account of the Begaree campaign—he would have been a much happier man.

Mr. Ullney, his immediate superior, he saw very little of. That gentleman had succeeded in forcing his wife to return to India, and he was so wrapped up in the contemplation, prospectively, of the ingenious little punishments he would inflict upon her for thwarting his wishes so long, that he did not

, feel the time hang heavy at all. Talk, even of the emptiest and most superficial kind, a cross-headed argument about the pronunciation or spelling of a word, or on any other subject equally profound, will remove a man *pro tem.* out of the circle of his own cares, and this is no small boon.

Poor Lony Ochter was not aware of this, or he would not have despised the society even of the Skewbalds. Many a man who finds his nightly mess so killingly slow, and his companions so unbearable, would think very differently indeed if he was put to the solitude test. Such desolation as one feels in India, and, I suppose, in the colonies, is entirely unknown to civilized men in England. Our hero, of course, forgot altogether the trifling vexations and little biting annoyances which worried him when his wife was by his side; he did not think now of the momentary depression he used to feel, on contrasting her dulness to him with her vivacity to strangers; nor did he remember the chills which came over him on seeing his Flora talking earnestly with Stapleton in the gardens. If they had occurred to him at this time, he would probably

have sneered at his miserable folly. The wretched man had his wife's daily letters to read, which was a short pleasure, and his own answers to them to write, which was a task; simply because he felt himself bound to write cheerfully to her, and this was difficult.

A man of sanguine temperament, once depressed, reflects his sadness upon everything he says and writes, more than does the man whose spirits never run high.

"It would never do," said Ochter to himself, "to let Flo think that I am as wretched as I am; if she had any inkling of it, she would come back without saying a word to anybody."

Such was the poor dear fellow's persuasion. Great, then, was his effort to write as pleasantly to his wife as she did to him; for she amused him for a quarter of an hour per diem with gay histories of Paharnauth people and of the conquests his beautiful sister Esther was making. In addition, of course, every letter contained the regulation spice with which every affectionate wife's letter to an absent husband is flavoured. "He really must get leave and

come up. She was certain his health required it. She could scarcely enjoy anything without his company. She believed it so very selfish of her to remain in the midst of gaiety and pleasure while her dear Henry was alone in the terrible plains. It was all nonsense saying she was delicate. She was now quite strong; and, unless he could hold out some hope of being able to join her, she made up her mind to come down directly. Paharnauth was very cool and delicious, and all that, but she could not endure any longer being separated from him."

Surely to read such sincere out-pourings of a loving heart, day after day, must have been a great comfort to the solitary Ochter! Did he not say to himself, "With such a true-hearted and affectionate wife as this, what a wretch I am to allow myself to feel miserable because that d——d Muggins—the manager of the Mehurbanee Bank, his name—writes cheeky letters, and threatens things the beast would not dare to carry out." Ochter had quite forgotten the petty vexation which he gave way to some time before, when he received very little sympathy from Flora on his attempting to reveal to her the un-

satisfactory condition of his finances. He did not write to her about them now, he said to himself, because he would not for the world make her unhappy.

As "going into the banks" is not a particularly uncommon journey now-a-days, and as people in the vast majority of cases who do go in are treated very fairly, and come out again without peril or wreck; and as, moreover, very few who are in appear to be depressed or beaten down by the fact, it may seem extraordinary that our whilome light-hearted Lony Ochter should suffer so much anxiety from his liabilities to the Mehurbanee. He had been extravagant and heedless, but not so to an extraordinary degree: why, then, should he be so hard-pressed just now? The relations between the Mehurbanee Bank and its clients were somewhat peculiar; and no parallel can be put forward for them in modern days, so it may be as well to sketch them.

The bank was highly prosperous—so is every bank until it breaks—and "all the go" with the fast young men of Lony Ochter's generation. The facilities for borrowing money, and the interest pay-

able for said moneys, appeared to be the same as at other institutions of the kind; yet the Mehurbanee got the greater part of the loan business, which is all we are concerned with. Lony Ochter's first interview with Mr. Muggins was on the occasion of his investing in some valuable horses, belonging to a man going home, to whom cash payment must be made. He was received with the greatest politeness, told to take his own time about interests and instalments, for the directors did not wish to be strict with young gentlemen of the Civil Service, though the opposite course was necessary with tradespeople and others, who were not very safe. Mr. Muggins' sympathies were altogether with the covenanted service. Lony Ochter, having provided the usual securities, got his loan, purchased his horses, and—to give him credit—took full advantage of the licence as to repayment which he had been told to take. Gradually the time ran up within which the sum originally borrowed, with a moderate interest attached, was to have been repaid, and a note from Mr. Muggins, calling upon him for the whole sum, just reminded the careless Ochter of the fact.

Shuddering at the possibility of his securities being annoyed—for, like every other borrower, in the fulness of his repaying faith, he considered securities superfluous at the time of borrowing—he rushed to the bank, and was there received by Mr. Muggins, looking very grave indeed, and stripped of that cordial air with which the young civilian had at first been greeted. Time was out of the question—a bank's first duty was to its shareholders—these were the rules of the loan department—to Lony Ochter's eager reminder, that he, the manager, had himself mentioned that they were more a matter of form than anything else, Mr. Muggins answered indignantly that Mr. Ochter surely did not expect that he was to be allowed never to pay back the money lent him!

What was the now miserable Ochter to do? Raise a fresh sum on new securities, and pay off the first with it! Without minding the unpleasantness of asking other men to pledge themselves for him a second time, Mr. Muggins told him that it was entirely out of the power of the bank to receive such a proposition.

"As for raising it at another house," said Mr. Muggins, seeing such an idea probably in the young fellow's face, "you may find it difficult." And so he would, for in those days all the temples of Plutus in the presidency were on mutually protective terms with each other, and each knew the exact number of rats in their respective traps, and the names and prospects and position of each individual rat. Things, of course, have altered very much since the time I write of.

"I only know one way of saving you," said Mr. Muggins: "you are perfectly sure you have no private funds, no interest in the different estates your late father died possessed of in Paharnauth and elsewhere?"

"No, no," said Ochter; "it is pretty certain if I had, I should not be in this infernal fix."

"Your mother would not allow you to suffer, I am convinced?" said Muggins.

"Sir, I don't wish her on any account to know."

"Have you any objection to sign this document, Mr. Ochter? I may be able to help you, but not unless you put your name here; it looks very

mysterious, I know ; but you will find that it does not bind you to anything extraordinary. I'll read it for you ; but you must first promise, upon your honour, not to make known to any one that this paper has been presented to you for signature, should you prefer not to sign it."

"All right ; I promise so far," said Ochter ; whose curiosity, not without a slight mixture of alarm, was excited by all these precautions.

"Well, then,—listen ! I do hereby bind myself not to divulge, under any circumstances, the terms about to be disclosed to me of the secret loan rules of the Mehurbanee Bank. This, you see, ties you down to nothing ;—you sign it. I let you know our terms ; if you don't like them, there's no harm done."

"But what's the object of all this secrecy ? Hanged if I can make it out ! A loan is a loan, and worth, I suppose, like everything else, the highest price it will fetch," said Ochter.

"We are not bound to publish the reason of our plan of doing business."

"Of course not," Ochter replied, though he may

have thought differently: "I don't object to sign," he added, taking up a pen.

After all, as Muggins said, it was only binding himself not to tell; and he had, from youth upwards, bound himself not to tell many a time, and he never found himself much inconvenienced thereby.

"Wait a moment," said the manager, opening the door as he spoke; "tell Mr. Cruz and Mr. Lopez to come here." Having given this order to the messenger outside, he returned and covered the whole of the document, except the place for the names, with a piece of blotting-paper. "Your signature must be witnessed, you know."

Messrs. Cruz and Lopez, whose names indicate sufficiently their position and appearance, came in, and Mr. Ochter signed the paper; after him Messrs. Cruz and Lopez, who then retreated, and were heard squabbling on the way back to their desk because the junior signed above the senior clerk. Why need I mention this? quarrels for precedency, on occasions equally trivial, are never heard of amongst refined folk.

"Now, Mr. Ochter," said the manager, "you want

a sum of money to pay us back our loan. We will lend it to you."

"But what about security?"

"I will come to that presently. We have to meet an unexpected run upon our deposit funds, and this it is which makes my dealings with you so harsh as they appear to be. You have no way, you tell me, of paying back our loan, and you will not object to make a little sacrifice for the indulgence we show you in not falling back, as we are able to do, upon your securities?"

"Tell me, for God's sake, what your terms are! To be sure I would do anything rather than let them suffer," said Lony Ochter.

"Say, then," the manager continued coolly, not at all noticing the flurried, nervous manner of his client, "that your debt to us is 20,000 rupees. I don't know the exact sum, but I use the round numbers for simplicity's sake. For absolving you of this you sign an agreement to pay us within a certain time, by fixed instalments, the sum of 22,500 rupees."

"Oh, my good heavens!" poor Lony Ochter cried out.

"Pray don't interrupt me. 22,500 rupees. You will have to pay also double the published rates of interest until the principal is cleared off; and there are some minor charges—fines for delay in paying your instalments, et cetera. This you, no doubt, consider highly exorbitant and usurious?" Lony Ochter, who was staring at him with a horrified expression, did not, or could not deny the impeachment. "But what are our risks! We lend you the money on your personal security."

"My personal security?" said the victim.

He repeated those words with a feeling of relief which he could not disguise.

"Yes: we ask for no securities; we do not even ask you to insure your life again. The first policy remains with us, of course; but you will not be called upon for the premium. I believe there is only one thing more to mention—you know what a post-obit is?"

"I have heard of them," Lony Ochter replied; "lucky young fellows—heirs to entailed estates—raise money upon them before their fathers die. I always thought it deuced unnatural to do it."

"That depends. The only thing in the shape of security required from you is a sort of post-obit," replied the emotionless Muggins.

"Post-obit from me! why I am heir to nothing that I know of!" he exclaimed.

"Suppose your mother were to die suddenly to-day or to-morrow, without making any disposition of her property; would you have nothing in that case? Or is it not likely that she will leave you a part of it when she dies?"

Lony Ochter was quite staggered by the cold, ravenous style of Mr. Muggins' suppositions. He leant his head on his hand for a minute or two, and then looked up.

"It is almost probable that you will have something; in any case it is our duty to ourselves, seeing the risks, the very great risks, we run, to take advantage of the probability—you understand me fully, I hope? You will have to sign a document giving the bank, in default of payment, a claim upon any legacy or property which you may inherit to the amount of our loan, with interest. Do you object to the terms?"

Muggins had ended his exposition. The last thing Lony Ochter would think of was the legality of the Mehurbanee's arrangement. He showed a little wisdom, however, first in restraining his indignation, and secondly, in saying to Mr. Muggins,—

“Will you give me a day to consider this?”

“Take two if you like,” said Mr. Muggins in reply.

Lony Ochter left the room with by no means a light heart. His friends, who were waiting for him to keep some appointment at the Raj Hans Club, and who knew that he was returning from a visit to the redoubtable Muggins, chaffed him much on his return. When he said, in answer to a question, that he found Muggins as hard as a stone, that he must at once back out of the training-stable and society in general, and sell everything he had in the world,—

“Why, if you begin that highly laudable and retrenching system, the tradesmen will think you are going to cut, and, gad! they will quad you instanter,” said one of his friends.

Poor Lony Ochter had not thought of that.

“Hang it!” said another, “if Muggins won't be

reasonable, you must get your Moonshree to find some gentlemanly native—a gentlemanly native, mind; and you must see what you can do with him. Muggins must have been struck heavily lately.”

“For my part,” said the first speaker, “I thought Lony here went only to have tiffin with those highly respectable three-quarters native gentlemen, Cruz and Lopez.”

This remark was received by a jolly laugh from the whole party, which was so significant that Lony Ochter brightened up immediately. All those fellows were evidently in the “same boat;” it could not then be so very leaky a craft as he had fancied. Not a word more was said about Mr. Muggins or Messrs. Cruz and Lopez; and next day, Lony Ochter wrote to the former to request that the necessary papers might be made out without delay.

I have given much more space to the account of this little transaction than it deserves; but it may be pardoned as illustrative of the palmy days gone by, never, it is to be feared, to return! when, as good authorities tell us, men commenced their

Indian career laden with formidable debts, and ended it laden with formidable fortunes.

Lony Ochter bore his burden as lightly as the rest until, carried along by irresistible influences, he became a married man, and then trifles, previously light as air, became very weighty matters to think of. The manager of the Mehurbanee seemed to take a peculiar delight in goading him, since his marriage appeared in print. Other creditors, too, became importunate. He found it much the easiest way, and the most comfortable for all parties, to pay nothing during his brilliant career in Calcutta. Afterwards, in Chillumpore, his solitary breakfast-table, morning after morning, was covered with reminders from people who a short time before pressed their trumpery, backed by unlimited credit, upon his attention. Letters, which used to be obsequious and humble, became bold and impertinent. Could it be possible that they had learnt how embarrassed he was? Must he descend so low as to beg time from such fellows as those advertising impostors Buck Jeeb and Co.—a long extinct firm, the partners of which are now reposing in lordly

mausolea in noble English demesnes ; their descendants being leading county families, having among them influential Members of Parliament and chairmen of the most prosperous railway companies.

There are no such great men in India now as Buck and Jeeb. They kept their own hop-garden in Kent, and their own breweries at Prestonpans. They rented a long fishery-right on the Clyde, to enable them to supply their customers with the curdiest and freshest of salmon in tin. The buffalo humps they supplied were not the produce of the mud-loving, bazaar-fed, uninteresting animals of India ; they came direct from the Rocky Mountains and the depths of the far West, where a partner of the great firm resided constantly, and slew the ferocious animals, from which the Calcutta house was supplied, with his own hands. A striking illustration of one of this gentleman's personal encounters alone in a vast rolling prairie, surrounded by thousands of wild buffaloes, generally accompanied the catalogue of their splendid supplies. This one instance of the energy and resources of the firm being mentioned for the benefit of the sluggish merchants of the present day,

I need not allude to their tea plantations in China, their tobacco fields in Manilla and Cuba, their vineyards on the most sunny ridges of the Côte d'Or, their part-ownership of the famous Château Johannisberg, their champagne and brandy cellars in France, and their dairies in Cheshire; the latter superintended by the senior partner, a gentleman of unbounded experience. By the aid of untiring research and the profoundest chemical knowledge, to mention but one example of the benefits conferred upon mankind by Mr. Goliha Buck, an entirely new kind of butter was invented by him, and distributed gratis amongst his customers, warranted to continue ever fresh, and not to melt at the highest temperature. This valuable butter was, I need scarcely say, greedily swallowed. The greatest men, alas! have the most virulent enemies; and such was the fate of Buck and Jeeb. Men were found—not many, to be sure—who made the same declaration about Buck and Jeeb's periodical Report as some talented man—a bishop, I believe—made about Captain Lemuel Gulliver's Travels, and on equally unjustifiable grounds: "they did not believe a word of it." For-

tunately for mankind, such heartless sceptics were rare.

"Don't tell me, sir!" I remember my old friend Tom Mirrich saying one time, very angrily, when I, as suavely as possible, endeavoured to show him that the vineyards and the plantations must exist, for Messrs. Buck and Jeeb said so in print. "Don't tell me! I never knew any one over a hundred miles from the Ditch get anything worth eating and drinking twice from Buck and Jeeb; you might get something not fit to be thrown away the first time; but the second—especially if you were in a jungle-station, far beyond the reach of fresh supplies—what an infernal imposition it was! Sour flat beer, mouldy cheese, putrid fish, murderous wine. If you ventured to expostulate, you received an impertinent assurance that the beer had just arrived from their brewery, and the wine from their best French cellars: deny that, and you got your bill and a lawyer's letter."

"But, my dear Mirrich, read this list; look at their splendid trade."

"D—n the list!" he roared out; "and as for

the trade, it is with messes where no one looks after anything, and with fools and gulls like yourself."

This coarse language of Mirrich's prevented my discussing the matter further; but I still supported Buck and Jeeb. They were at least as good as Joot, Moot and Co., Fureeb, Fulon and Co., Sub, Cohi and Co., and a score or two more; even if their vineyards, and Johannisberg rights, and their junior partner at Xeres, were veritable *Châteaux en Espagne*, though I was not at all so incredulous as to doubt their existence.

Resisting the temptation, natural enough, to be a *laudator temporis acti*, I fear the tradesmen of the long bygone age—which it is always to be understood I write of—the European merchants *par excellence*, in contradistinction to the Nubbee Bux and the Cowasjee tribes, cannot be spoken favourably of. That they were endured at all, is a wonder. *Hibernicis ipsis Hiberniores*, greater rogues than the natives themselves, they seemed to have lost by their acclimatation every good Anglo-Saxon quality, and to have acquired every bad Indian characteristic, in

addition to such home viciousness as they brought to the country with them ; improvident, scandalously extravagant in their habits, entirely destitute of business ideas, blustering, impudent, and lazy, it was, without opening up the question of average honesty, rare to meet even with as high a degree of civility from them as the lowest London costermonger exhibits. Customers shuddered at their exorbitant demands, calculated the seller's profit at three or four hundred per cent., and decided that they were rivalling the alchemists, when the true state of affairs very often was, that the supposed millionaire was merely a commission agent, keeping his head above water with the greatest difficulty, hampered by endless debt, idle, insolent, and drunken withal, and endeavouring, by quintuplicating his lawful percentage, to obtain funds to support him in his do-nothing sottishness. No amount of adversity had any effect upon such men, except in developing them into regular swindlers and mock auctioneers. In my days, not a man who entrusted his property to these latter to be disposed of, but had ample cause to repent. Bills of sale, if rendered at all, came in

months after the promised time. Let the demand for household articles and house-ware have been ever so brisk at the time of sale, he found that his large marble-topped table went for three rupees twelve annas, and his new dessert service for five rupees four annas.

But are we not all convinced that nothing of this sort happens now-a-days? Do we not find, wherever we go, European merchants most moderate, most civil, most honest, most willing to take back any accidentally inferior goods, most ready to warrant everything they have to be first quality, most anxious not to press you with their bills—but then their profits are such a mere trifle that they cannot afford to wait—most slow to proceed to legal extremities if they hear of your being in temporary money difficulty, most sober, most economical, most pious?

I have wandered far from my debt-stricken hero, who, besides his troubles with Mr. Muggins, had to struggle with Buck, Jeeb and Co., and Sub, Cobi and Co. Could he well help torturing himself with dismal fancies of the disgrace and ill-repute an action in the civil courts, with the above-

mentioned tradesmen as plaintiffs, would bring upon him? He had been rash enough, at first, to throw himself in some degree upon the mercy of his creditors, on the strength of their former cringing civility to him; and he confided to them that his finances were not so prosperous as they might believe, requesting at the same time that they would allow him a little breathing-time; he wrote, however, in the distant, stand-off language, which employers generally use to business-folk in England, neglecting the essential "Dear Sir" and "Yours most sincerely," at the beginning and ending of his communication—little forms of writing without using which the experienced strata of the upper crust find it most satisfactory to correspond with the lower. The souls of the partners in the house of Sub, Cohi and Co., were inflamed by "the insult offered to their dignity, by a fellow who could not pay his debts." Their "man of business" was summoned, illustrious amongst the Calcutta Forty, the famed writer to the signet, named Drogah, who loved law only second to brandy. He indited such an epistle to poor Lony Ochter as quite took away

the little remaining jollity he had. He was too miserable to reflect, or he might have soon satisfied himself, that the idea of his being proceeded against for a trifling debt by the firm of Sub and Cohi was too absurd to be endured for a moment.

Severely as Mr. Attorney Drogah wrote, positive as his demand appeared to be, his clients were not such entirely demented animals as to drag into a public court a live assistant magistrate. Who ever heard of such a thing? If Mr. Ochter had been a wretched subaltern of Dars, or head clerk in a district office, or some such small deer, his apprehension might have been well founded, for those are fit subjects for hunting down; but we know from experience that the letters B.C.S. in India protect one from the horrors of the vulgar law, as effectually as M.P. in England. Rough-riden, however, as our poor hero was, by the demon of debt, he all but forgot the privilege of his rank. Mr. Muggins swallowed a large portion of his monthly salary; "dear Flora" did the same; left with a bare subsistence allowance for many months to come, he could not see how

he was to struggle through his difficulties. His only chance left was the training stable for the "grand metropolitan." His bachelor confederates, skilled in horses, wrote now and then (when they wanted his share of the cost of maintenance), and all spoke most hopefully of what their stud was certain to do. "We'll all be let in,—no end of a 'pot' I know," he said to himself: for his sanguine spirit was gone, and he could not think hopefully of anything; "I wish to heaven I could get out of it! but how can I?"

With all these cares brooding in his mind, Lony Ochter made a very poor business of his official duty. He put all his soul, as he thought, into his work; but his soul slipped the collar at once, and wandered off to his wife in the Hills, and to what reply he would receive to his last appeal to Mr. Muggins, and to what answer he ought to make to Mr. Drogah's last letter enclosing his bill of costs up to that date, by the payment of which, without referring the same to Messrs. Sub, Cohi and Co., Mr. Lony Ochter would be made secure from law proceedings for some time to come.

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Mr. Drogah was very much under the influence of his employer's best "John Ex-Shaw," when he made this injudicious proposal to Mr. Ochter, and when he became sober, he, Mr. Drogah, became very despondent at the thought of the mischief it might get him into; but he was perfectly safe in the hands of our heart-broken hero, who thought of nothing but what might happen to himself, and never dreamt of the existence of such a potent engine as retaliation. No one could toil at other work satisfactorily when overpowered by private solitudes and troubles; and it will not astonish the reader, though it astonished Mr. Ullney very much, to learn that he made a sad muddle of his duties.

Mr. Ullney was not what could be styled an amiable man. He always liked to have a little persecuting work in hand. When he was first introduced to the reader he was engaged in bringing his absent wife into a fit state of matrimonial discipline. Her submission having been secured, he was inclined to rest on his laurels until she should join him; but he soon discovered that this little

solace was not to be allowed him; through the stupidity, or the carelessness, or other backsliding of his junior. With the best intention, Lony Ochter had, some time before, taken a bold step, and actually had commenced to do the current work himself, dispensing, as much as possible with the zealous guidance of the chief of his Omlah, to whose care Mr. Ullney had at first advised that he should altogether commit himself. The Native gentleman, a man of long service, and, of course, spotless integrity, did not, for some reasons best known to himself, approve of Mr. Ochter's thus voluntarily burdening himself with work, but he did not say a word in opposition to it.

So long as the assistant to the magistrate was not seriously affected by other anxieties, with his Flora to delight in at home, and his duns not boring him, he made few remarkable blunders: but when he became depressed, first by solitude, afterwards by the other causes I have alluded to, things got into a very painful muddle. Decision after decision, each more subversive of ordinary common-sense justice than the preceding one, was appealed against, in

Mr. Ullney's office. He was put to a great deal of unnecessary trouble and annoyance; he attacked the Native, first believing that the direction of the minor office was still in his hands. He asked him, furiously, why he allowed the assistant to put his name to such absurd opinions and verdicts as had been coming before him, Mr. Ullney, of late. The Native, of course, told how Ochter had himself assumed the direction, and how he must write whatever the assistant dictated; instead of the former arrangement, in which Mr. Ochter took no part, beyond placing his initials upon empty corners of Native documents. Nothing could equal Mr. Ullney's exasperation. "I should not mind," he said to himself, "if the young fellow knew an iota of his work; there might then be some excuse for his trying to do it; but it is evident, from what he has dictated here, that he knows nothing, that he cares to know nothing: yet he declines any help! I must write him a public letter—I must, indeed."

When Mr. Ullney got to his office with this new intention, having margined his sheet of foolscap, he felt quite happy; it was pleasant to have something

to do while his brace of readers were droning on each side. He could hear quite distinctly the voices in Lony Ochter's court, in the same building; and it might be fancied that Mr. Ullney, by walking a few feet, or by sending for his junior, could effect his purpose quite as conveniently as by a troublesome letter; but nothing of the sort crossed Mr. Ullney's mind. His letter, referring to some very unusual decisions in the court of the assistant magistrate, and requesting that gentleman's attention in future to par. — section — of the Regulations of the South-Eastern Provinces, would help to pass the time; and as a public, not a private communication, it would have the effect of making assistant magistrates more careful and diligent than if given by word of mouth. Besides, this letter would have an answer, possibly not submissive enough; for young fellows at times do not feel at all humble, even when they are in the wrong. Then this reply would need another "wig," and so on. There was, in fact, quite a pleasant opening for the magistrate.

Poor Ochter! distracted as he was, was under a delusion, perhaps not peculiar to him, that

because he sat in Cutcherry from morning till night, and because he fancied that he listened attentively to both sides of every plaint, and because he made all orders thereon himself, that he was the most diligent and self-sacrificing of State servants. When he contrasted his busy life now, with his pleasure-hunting career in Calcutta, he felt quite proud, notwithstanding his sorrows, of the great reformation which had taken place. He really looked upon himself as a junior of much promise; and he had an internal conviction that Mr. Ullney, in his reports to the Sudder Bekoofi Board, must have testified to his zeal, energy, attention to his work, and so forth. What a horrible awakening that was of his, when a long letter, both as to shape and contents, was delivered to him, "On the Public Service only," duly numbered, docketed, and franked, in which his senior pointed out to him, in elaborate official language, that he either grossly neglected his work, or was grossly ignorant of the very elements of his duties. The letter recapitulated at length his judgments for the past three weeks; pointed out, with undeniable truth and clearness, that nobody

who had paid the least attention to the details of the respective cases could have given such decisions, and expressed a very decided opinion as to the extent of the knowledge of the language possessed by the assistant to the magistrate of Chillumpore. "Pleasant reward this, for working like a horse in this cursed hole from morning until night!" muttered Ochter, who, like many another, estimated the value of his work by the quantity of time he had given to it. If he had only his duties to occupy his mind, he might have got along, at all events without gross blundering; but with cares and anxieties, magnified by low spirits, unceasingly pressing on his brain, though he heard, and, as he fancied, attentively listened to, every item of plea and evidence, he really could not have told, if suddenly asked, even the subject matter of any one of the cases he was supposed to investigate.

A second perusal of the magistrate's letter convinced him that he fully deserved the tremendous "wig," and he received it as another proof of his uselessness and impending ruin. "Ullney will forward a copy of this letter, with my answer, to the

Sudder Bekoofi; and I may expect to be suspended at least until I know the regulations and language better; and what will become of me then?" He returned home from office that day completely prostrated. Want of exercise, of appetite, and of sleep, in addition to the glooms and money troubles which were preying upon him, had made sad havoc, in the very short time that suffices in India, of the iron constitution and joyous temperament Nature had given him. People noticed the alarming change; but he repulsed, almost gruffly, the visits and inquiries of his Chillumpore friends. The milk of average human kindness is easily curdled; his ready frown and almost angry answer to a good-natured inquiry, put to flight all who were so far interested in him as to express their surprise at seeing him look so badly. Brandy-and-water and tobacco do not constitute a very wholesome or nutritious dietary, when used alone; but Lony Ochter took little else for weeks. Hour after hour of the hot, stifling nights of May and June did he wander up and down his verandah, talking hurriedly to himself—he preferred it to tossing about on a sleepless bed.

Such sleep as he obtained, when completely worn out, was a whirlwind of horrible dreams, from which he was happy to awake, rather exhausted than refreshed.

An old servant, who joined his father when he had just arrived as a cadet, and who had never left him for a day until the old colonel himself ceased to serve in this world, went secretly to Mr. Ullney, and told him, with tears running down his sunken cheeks, of his master's state. (Don't call this "damn rot," friend Safkur; natives are brutes, and blood-thirsty wretches, and the most infernal savages on the face of the earth, as you say: no one can dispute it for a moment. But the most faithful servants have been found amongst dark faces over and over again—exceptions to prove your rule, you know.) Mr. Ullney would scarcely hear him; he saw his assistant every day at Cutcherry; and this was in itself a proof that the servant was grossly exaggerating: natives always do. So he ordered the man out.

"This throws a new light upon the mess he makes of his work. Taken to drink hard, apparently!" Mr. Ullney thought. "I suppose he comes, half

drunk, to Cutcherry; I must look into his court to-morrow. Horrible nuisance for me! I wish I could get some one else."

The poor servant would not have been over-delighted, if he could have known what mischief his well-meant interference might do his master. Ullney rather rejoiced to discover a new vice in his assistant, besides the idleness and stupidity he had already complained of; and he made a resolution to repeat his first dose instantler, if there was any occasion for it.

So the time sped with this happy young husband, while his loving wife found, as we have seen, existence, without him, very dull at gay Paharnauth.

CHAPTER IV.

DECLARED TO WIN.

It was, as hath been previously deposed, the day after the cavalry ball. Mrs. Ochter, with her three daughters and Flora around her, was arranging busily the details of a select picnic which she had for some time intended to get up. Being a very modest affair, the invitations were to be given only four days beforehand, and the list of the chosen was under discussion that forenoon. Flora, calm and smiling as usual, though with no small hate smouldering within her since the scene of the night before, in which Captain Stapleton, Mr. Budlee, and she, were concerned, and from which she had made some deductions anything but agreeable to herself, was prudent enough to take no part in this discussion until her opinion was expressly asked; it nearly always was, as Mrs. Ochter, senior, had the very

highest opinion of her daughter-in-law, and looked upon her as a most efficient aid. Business had been interrupted for nearly a quarter of an hour, by an argument which arose upon a veil worn by Mrs. Nooksaun the night before, the question being, "whether it had really come from Chantilly or not." Before the point could be satisfactorily settled, Mrs. Ochter said, rather impatiently,—

"Do go on, Gerty; the whole morning will slip away before we know whom we are to have even! Who is the next?"

"I am sure it is a common English thing: it could not have cost more than six or seven—Oh! I beg your pardon, mamma," said the offending Gertrude, catching mamma's eye, and immediately taking another card from the basket on her lap. "Mr. R. C. Futwa. Who is Mr. R. C. Futwa?"

"Some intellectual ensign," said Louisa.

"I rather think he is a lieutenant with a cocked nose," said Gerty.

"Don't you remember his calling, Esther?" said Mrs. Ochter, appealing to her eldest daughter in a despairing tone.

"We must have been out when he came, mamma. Go on, Gertrude."

"Poor Mr. Futwa! Captain L. L. Chupkun, and Mrs. L. L. Chupkun; here are their cards together. You say we don't want any more married people. Does any one object to Mr. Betel, then? I hope not; he is a dear little man with such funny whiskers!" said Gerty.

"He is a magistrate somewhere near Chillumpore, Flora, isn't he? I thought him rather agreeable. Put his name down, Esther."

"We have got nearly all we have room for now, mamma," Esther said, "unless you mean to leave out some you were doubtful about at first, you remember. Mr. and Mrs. Russud, surely they have no taste for a scramble amongst rocks and thorns!"

"But then we can't leave them out if we invite Mr. McCuddum, can we, Flora? We must ask them, at all events."

"I think so too," said her daughter-in-law: "unless we leave out Mr. McCuddum, and that is out of the question; he called here several times, and he is most attentive whenever we meet him."

“Oh! Mr. McCuddum cannot, on any account, be left out; our party would be quite dull without him,” said Esther, examining her list, and speaking very fast, and in almost a bitter tone.

“He dances so well, and is such a very lively and agreeable person to talk to,” Gerty added, firing a shot on Esther’s side, for she began to see pretty clearly what the family politics were.

“He is not at all pleasant to look at, but he may dance and talk very agreeably: clever man, isn’t he, mamma?” Louisa said, quite innocently; she rarely went out, and had not the same opportunities of observing events as her younger sisters had. It did not suit Mrs. Ochter’s policy at all, to let her younger daughters know how much annoyed she was by their critical remarks upon her favourite; she pretended not to notice the style of Esther’s remark, but she saw well that it boded no good, and that if Mr. McCuddum did declare himself, as everybody said he must, she would have to nerve herself for a struggle with the most loved of her girls. She managed to say, without a trace of anger in her voice,—

"Upon my word, Louisa, you will soon be as incorrigible as Gertrude; her silly tongue there is no controlling. Yes, Esther; put down the Russuds as well as Mr. McCuddum. Who are the other doubtfuls, dear?"

"Colonel Budlee and Mr. Budlee, the Shammass, Mrs. Neem, Mr. Caunta, Mrs. Gingall and her daughters, and Captain Stapleton; I think that's all."

"We need not have that tiresome Colonel Budlee and his son, I am sure; I don't like either. What do you think, Flora?" said Mrs. Ochter.

"We might get on without them, ma'am," was the reply.

"Poor Esther will be inconsolable if Mr. Budlee is not asked. Pray have some regard for her feelings, mamma," cried Gertrude.

"Silence, Miss Pert! I don't see," said Esther, "why we should exclude old friends on account of people we scarcely know."

"Then, those poor gawks of girls, the Gingalls and their mother! Captain Stapleton will expect them to be asked, because he brought them here to

pay a visit. It is almost cruel to invite them, as nobody knows them, and they will only be miserable the whole day," said Mrs. Ochter, turning to Flora. The latter lady answered, with her eyes watchfully fixed upon Esther's face, who was very busy correcting her list,—

"In that case, the easiest way will be not to ask Captain Stapleton."

"Dear me, Flora! scratch out Henry's great friend? Isn't that hard? We all thought you liked him so much," said Gertrude.

Esther said nothing: with the assistance of paper and pencil she rendered herself inscrutable, even to Flora.

"Speaking for myself, I would much prefer his coming."

"But I know he won't, my dears! Indeed I asked him last night when he was helping me into the jampan, and he said he could not possibly come," said Mrs. Ochter. "He appeared very much cast down about something. After all, we may as well ask the Gingalls, and take our chance of their not coming."

Flora, who felt rather disappointed at being deprived of a chance of making Captain Stapleton feel how he had fallen in her estimation, had a sort of satisfaction in noticing signs of agitation about Esther at Mrs. Ochter's last words. "Perhaps the affection is mutual," she said to herself; "what a pleasant discovery it will be for her mamma to make!" Gertrude, who had been looking out of the window for the last few minutes, came to where Esther was seated, and said to her,—

"I am quite tired of this arranging and rearranging. Come and give me that book, you promised me yesterday, Esther; I know you won't trust me with your keys to get it myself; I want to read it so badly."

"Come back at once, Esther darling; you know all the notes have to be written yet: Louisa will help you," said Mrs. Ochter.

As soon as they were outside the door, Gertrude whispered,—

"I saw that dreadful Mr. McCuddum coming up the path slowly; I thought you would like to get away. What will you do, poor Esty, if he is come

to—you know what I heard mamma say last night to Flora—that she had no doubt about it.”

“Nonsense! Gerty darling,” poor Esther answered, feeling, however, very frightened, and only too glad to flee to her own room for shelter.

She was soon joined by Louisa, who said that Flora and she had to retreat after Mr. McCuddum came in. He looked, she reported, a great deal more flurried than ever—and more amusing, as a very gaudy necktie he had got on had managed to twist round so that the tie was under his ear.

“He said something to mamma, about wishing to see her particularly, and then mamma nodded to Flora and myself, and we slipped out. I wonder what can be the matter!” said the very badly informed Louisa. Esther, very pale, and trembling all over, said that she felt faint and would lie down for a little.

“You are not looking at all so well lately, Esther dear, as you used. I am afraid all those balls and parties weary you a great deal more than you think. There, lie down. I will come back presently. Do you come with me, Gerty.”

In their own chamber, Miss Gertrude thought it advisable to communicate to her elder sister certain particulars which Louisa, up to that moment, was entirely ignorant of. She was very much astonished, but she was on the whole inclined to think that a great deal more was made of Mr. McCuddum's little demonstrations than was even rational. But she could not conceal from herself that poor Esther was very uneasy, and it was very possible that he might have given her more reason for suspecting what his feelings were with regard to her than any Gertrude could mention.

When I wrote that Mr. McCuddum came to Beauclerc Cottage, and "popped," to use a very expressive, though slightly slangy monosyllable, I overlooked the chance of my readers being misled by my using the word "popped," because the common acceptation of the word "popping" is a direct proffer of heart *plus* hand to the loved one. If "popping" is to be used in this restricted sense, then I can only say that Mr. McCuddum did not "pop," and had no intention of "popping." He did, however, propose for Esther, solemnly and

earnestly, to Mrs. Ochter that day; while poor Esther was lying all in a tremble, the other two girls discussing the cause thereof, and Flora waiting impatiently for the result of the interview.

About half an hour after his admission, Mr. McCuddum left the house with an elation of air and an elasticity of step which Gerty, watching from above, could not fail to observe. She pointed out these suspicious appearances to Louisa, who, however, attached no value to them; she was not sufficiently acquainted with Mr. McCuddum's ordinary gait to be able to detect any difference. The girls next heard Mrs. Ochter coming up-stairs—she went into Esther's room, closed the door carefully; and here their observations terminated, for Flora summoned them to the drawing-room shortly afterwards, to help to write the picnic invitations.

The bashfulness with which Mr. McCuddum was oppressed was of a limited description, as we know. It only overpowered him in the presence of young and under middle-age ladies between fifteen and thirty-five, and this was before the critical period of his career at which now we find him arrived.

Of late, emboldened probably by the tender emotions which his first love had roused in his bosom, he struggled nobly against his weakness, and so far prevailed as to astonish himself by his achievements at the cavalry ball. Next day his courage had not at all oozed out; and lest it should, by any accident, having donned bright and festive raiment, he delivered himself into the presence of Mrs. Ochter. Hoping to find her alone, he was a good deal disconcerted by the presence of the younger females, of which however, he was speedily freed; but, for all that, his nerves did not recover for full five minutes after their departure,—an awkward interval, or it might have been so but for the sensible interposition of Mrs. Ochter.

She talked uninterruptedly for that time, the subject being the way in which Beauclerc Cottage was built—an inexhaustible theme for her. His confidence being restored under cover of her monologue, when she came to a pause he plunged in *medias res* straightway, by commencing to pour off a set discourse, a copy of which (in duplicate) was at that time in his desk in the state bedroom at

the Larch Runs. It was an elaborate composition, very much in the style of an address such as, in company with a testimonial, is now and then read at a happy father in commemoration of the illustrious deeds of his son. It commenced with "Madam," and ended with "happiness;" though, Mrs. Ochter was very much afraid, it would certainly conclude with "I have the honour to be, sir."

Unaccustomed as she was to official communications, particularly those of the very highest order, like Mr. McCuddum's, she had the greatest difficulty in gathering from the words what meaning they were intended to convey; but she was a very intelligent person, and by the time he had done she settled that he pronounced himself ardently attached to Esther; that he ventured to hope that she did not look upon him unfavourably (though he used some humble form of speech like this, expressed of course by the very loftiest words, he was sure that Esther was deeply in love with him, and that from the first she had rather set her bonnet at him than otherwise), and that he accordingly confided the state of his affections to Mrs. Ochter. That lady

made out further, that Mr. McCuddum considered it her duty to announce all this to Esther, to receive in return an avowal of her affections, and to communicate the same to him at her very earliest convenience.

The good lady was rather put out by the circuitousness, so to speak, of her daughter's lover's speech; but when she thoroughly understood it, a light, as of joy, illumined her countenance. She was not sparing of her stores of eloquence, all of which tended to show that nothing could make her happier than Mr. McCuddum's declaration; that she could not speak with certainty for her daughter, her darling Esther! that she could, however, hold out to him every hope of a most favourable answer; that she had no hesitation in saying that she knew nobody to whom she could entrust her dearest daughter with more confidence of her future happiness, than Mr. McCuddum. The secretary was very much gratified to hear all this; but being of rather a peculiar frame of mind, he wished to know his fate at once. He did not intend to remain a day longer in Paharnauth if Miss Ochter's

feelings did not coincide with his. This took Mrs. Ochter aback terribly. She knew, in her heart, that Esther would say "No" if suddenly pressed, notwithstanding Flora's assertions in their private conferences, that she would be only too glad to say "Yes;" but at the same time she relied much on her powers of persuasion. Now that Mr. McCuddum had declared himself, if a few days' grace were allowed her she might use arguments and entreaties which she could not have consistently brought to bear, so long as Esther could shelter herself behind a positive statement that Mr. McCuddum had no thoughts of her at all. Time must be procured, at any cost; and therefore Mrs. Ochter pleaded, with a much nearer approach to the truth than she fancied, that Esther was indisposed, and that she could not venture to disturb her even to communicate such an important matter as Mr. McCuddum's proposal. The moment she was sufficiently recovered he should hear, and the result should be made known to him without delay.

"Not that I think, my dear Mr. McCuddum, that my darling Esther will make the slightest oppo-

sition,—I have every reason to expect the contrary,—but she is so sensitive and delicate that anything out of the common must be broken to her very carefully. Dr. Soudagur mentioned this particularly when he was last here to see her.”

Now Mr. McCuddum, a gentleman of the highest intellectual powers, had no difficulty in seeing the force and accuracy of the lady’s arguments, and he could not but defer to them. This settled, Mrs. Ochter, having duly lubricated him with such blandishments as the delicate occasion suggested, let him go, with the understanding that he was to hear at the end of a week at furthest. He went away then, well pleased with the result of his visit, but rather astonished to find that the disposal of her daughters was not entirely in Mrs. Ochter’s hands. This discovery somewhat outraged his ideas of what was correct; for his belief, up to this time, was that mothers selected husbands for their daughters, very much as most fathers choose professions for their sons. He expected, it must be said, an immediate “Yes” from Mrs. Ochter, without the delay of a reference; and he could not in consequence but feel a

little disappointed. He was in some degree consoled by the receipt next morning of an invitation to a picnic under Beauclerc Cottage auspices, to be holden at Lovesmere, one of the many romantic spots in the vicinity of Paharnauth profaned by a ridiculous name, to which, just as in Canada, that used by the natives would be far preferable.

As was hoped, Mr. Russud would not go, on any account; and Mrs. Russud followed his example. Mr. McCuddum gladly accepted, for it was a good omen; and it might give him the opportunity, if he could only "pump up" the extraordinary amount of audacity required, of sounding the heart of the fair Esther directly. Much more time, he feared, would be required for preparing for such an effort, than that allowed him by the short invitation; but then he thought of his lemonade adventure in the ball-room, and did not despair.

When Mrs. Ochter had got him out of the house, although the grand object of her ambition was in her grasp, she felt by no means happy—not even comfortable. The problem she had to solve was, how to convert Miss Ochter into Mrs. McCuddum, with the

least possible unpleasantness; but the more she pondered, the more certain she felt that it was not to be done without a great deal of unpleasantness, nay, discord. Mrs. Ochter understood Esther's character pretty well; and if the good lady had any idea that Esther had already given away her heart, she would not have had the wildest hope of making her over to Mr. McCuddum. But there was no reason to suspect anything so disastrous: so she resolved not to delay a moment in communicating the purport of the secretary's visit.

Esther, lying on her bed, trembled with fear when she heard her mother's step on the stairs. She was a great coward, I am afraid; though, for all that, not a girl to be persuaded to do what she thought wrong, because others pronounced it right. When her mother came into the room, Esther knew exactly what was to be announced to her. She could see no escape. Mrs. Ochter, not at all expecting to see her apparently ill, said, "What's the matter, darling? Not one of the head-aches again?"

"I hope not, mamma; I felt, I don't know why, very weak when I came up-stairs with Gerty, and I

thought it better to lie down for a little. I am much better now ; I will be able to go down in an hour or so."

Mrs. Ochter did not see any necessity for deferring what she had to say, but she resolved to let Esther know it in the gentlest possible way ; and so, not to arouse her spirit of opposition, which, if once awakened, it would be all but impossible to lull again, she began :—

" My darling Esther ; I have something to tell you now which I cannot put off, and I have a very important question to ask you ; but mind, I do not want an immediate answer. You must only promise to think well over it before you give it. I need not say to you, that to see my dearest girl happily married to one who I am certain will cherish and respect her, would be a greater comfort to me than I can tell in words, and that there is no sacrifice I would not willingly make to secure it. You have, for the short time we have been together, been all the most particular mother could wish for, and many and many a time I find myself repining because God took away your poor father before he could know the happiness

of having you by his side. Mr. McCuddum came here to-day, to ask me to give you, my darling! to him. I feel confident that he is in every way worthy of you, and that he would be certain to make you happy; but I told him, though he had my full consent, I could do nothing but let you know, and ask you to say whether you will accept him or not. I will not try to hide from you, that your rejecting him would give me very great pain, but I would not for the world have you think of my feelings where your own happiness is concerned. All I ask, my darling, is, that you will not decide too hastily. I promised to let him know in the course of the week. We will say no more about it now."

And Mrs. Ochter kissed her daughter, whose face was hidden as much as possible during her mother's speech. Poor Esther could only answer with a sob. Mrs. Ochter left the room in a very despairing condition, but she flattered herself that she had made a satisfactory commencement.

She went straight to Flora to inform her of the state of affairs, and to take her valuable opinion upon the way Esther received the joyful tidings.

Flora yesterday could not have believed her ears, if she had heard that Esther appeared more terrified than delighted at Mr. McCuddum's declaration ; but now this conduct of hers appeared quite intelligible when considered side by side with Flora's discovery about Stapleton.

Flora was not so foolish as to communicate her suspicions to her mother-in-law. They were not sufficiently well grounded for this course, but even if they were, it was naturally Flora's policy, honest, womanly policy, to forward Mr. McCuddum's interests at the expense of the hateful Stapleton, for such he had become in a remarkably short time. Her husband's interests, too, were not to be disregarded. With the secretary of the Momjamma Board for a brother-in-law, Mr. Lony Ochter could not fail to advance rapidly ; a matter of no small importance to her, as she had long ago discovered that without some such help his forward movements would be very slow indeed. It is a pretty familiar fact, that in a service without any fixed rate of promotion, much as men may object to being passed over, men's wives feel it much more. Could there be a stronger

proof of a very high order of conjugal affection than this? If Smith, two terms below Robinson at Haileybury, shall, by superior ability or connections—for one word means very much the same as the other—get past Robinson and look down upon him from an elevation of one hundred rupees a month more pay, poor Robinson will, very naturally, entertain some slight feelings of envy and antipathy to the lucky Smith; and strange to say, Mrs. Robinson will cherish exactly the same sentiments towards Mrs. Smith. Why this should be, is a psychological problem, the solution of which is far beyond the reach of my very humble abilities.

Flora took great pains to demonstrate to the anxious Mrs. Ochter, that Esther's reception of the proposal made to her had nothing peculiar about it. It was probably maiden modesty which made her hide her face, and weep as if her heart would break. She herself, Flora, was very much affected when dear Henry proposed to her. She recommended Mrs. Ochter, at the same time, to keep the thing secret from the other girls for the next few days, and not for that period to question Esther. "Indeed I

am not certain," she said in conclusion, "whether it would not be your best plan to let Esther fancy that your heart is not much set upon it."

Flora suggested this, from a consciousness, perhaps, of a certain perverseness of spirit in her own disposition, and in that of young women in general; but her standard would not have suited the guileless Esther at all. The only bit of consolation Esther could gather from what her mother said, was, that she had a week's respite; until the end of that time, at all events, there was no necessity for putting on her war-paint. (Matter-of-fact readers are requested to note that this is a metaphorical expression.) So, after an hour or two's misery, arising out of very dismal reflections, in which a captain of Native Infantry figured very prominently, but at the same time very unaccountably, Esther swept away, as far as she could, all traces of her tears, and joined the family circle with such an assumption of cheerfulness as quite gratified her mother and rather mystified her sister-in-law.

Gerty and Louisa thought that Mr. McCuddum had been politely rejected; the former looked very

happy, because Mr. Gregorian had looked in to consult the ladies upon an intended modification of the choir arrangements, rendered necessary by the proceedings of one of the tuneful band, Mrs. Shore; who, from some fancied slight, had lately taken to singing persistently out of tune; to the horror of the clergyman, the just indignation of the other vocalists, and the great amusement of the rest of her hearers.

Poor Mr. Gregorian had not slept for several nights with thinking of what he ought to do. What he now wanted to propose was, that Esther, the gentlest messenger he could find, should go to Mrs. Shore and propitiate her; in the long and momentous discussion, which this plan gave rise to, Esther quite forgot her sorrows. When bed-time came, Gerty, all wakefulness and curiosity, besieged her eldest sister, Louisa abetting her; and they were both shocked to hear that the matter was not settled as they had hoped—so much so that they had no heart to talk about the coming Lovesmere picnic, a subject to which they would otherwise have devoted whole hours.

CHAPTER V.

COME TO GRIEF.

IN the midst of the Sahara of trouble, real and imaginary, by which we find the once blithe Lony Ochter surrounded, he did not lose sight for a moment of the one comforting oasis. If Flora were with him he could bear up much better; she would help him through his debt difficulties by her advice, for in the short time they were together she proved herself, to his satisfaction at all events, very wise and clear-headed; and he considered the hints and suggestions she occasionally gave him upon his dealings with the divers little business matters that turned up extremely valuable and effectual. When, however, his affairs became worse, when the manager of the bank and the attorney threatened their direst, when the magistrate never ceased sending him memos. and letters

day after day, "begging to inform him," and "calling his attention," and "requesting his explanation,"—enough to drive any man wild, however regardless of reproach he might be, poor Lony Ochter felt almost glad that his wife was beyond the reach of the unhappiness and trouble she must share, if she were by his side. He took a very different view, it will be seen, of the uses of matrimony from that insisted upon by the majority of the advocates for the holy state. Their leading idea of the use of a wife is, that a man should have somebody to share his cares with as well as his joys; now the happiest and the most fortunate among us get very few of the latter indeed as compared with the former; his cares may be ridiculously trivial, but they are cares for all that; and as for joys, who ever meets with them after fourteen, except the supereminently fortunate?

Without looking very deeply into the subject, it appears to my humble understanding a particularly selfish notion, that a man should take to himself a woman for the express purpose of transferring his troubles and sorrows to her shoulders: it

is a principle upon which the Cherokee appears to act when he forces his squaw to hoe maize and dig up roots. The question arises too, whether everyday cares and troubles press lighter upon a husband because his wife is also made sad and gloomy by them. Does he despond about them the less, because he knows his partner is desponding too? Is a mental burden lightened by sharing it? No! there must be a fallacy in the joy-and-sorrow-sharing theory of marriage. When a man comes home in the evening, vexed and unhappy, because his old friend Brown gave a dinner-party without asking him, because he has just been cut, beyond all doubting, by Sir Stephen Silvam, from whose friendship he had very high expectations; when a man comes home with such weighty tribulations as these upon him, he may find it highly consolatory to communicate them to the wife of his bosom, and to be, in the end, cheered by her proving to him clearly, that Brown's dinner-party was a stupid failure, or that Sir Stephen Silvam could not possibly have seen him.

So far a wife may be of use in sharing her

husband's troubles ; but when a real affliction befalls him, an ever so well-disposed wife can be of very little use in helping him to bear it, and it is cruel to expect her to make the effort. When a tremendous disaster meets a man, he would then prefer to be wifeless and childless. At least such was the feeling of Lony Ochter, who would not on any account have his wife know how wretched he was, or to what dangers—arrest, exposure, and so forth—he saw himself on the eve of succumbing. “She will know only too soon, and there is no good in making her unhappy now.” Her letters had still the power of cheering him up, but only for a few minutes. Her affectionate complaints of his brief and hurried answers to her lengthy accounts of all the gay doings at Paharnauth—her prettily expressed declarations, that this neglect of his made her feel quite jealous—her never ceasing anxieties about his health, on letters crossed and doubly underlined—how happy they must have made him !

Every morning, he watched with feverish eagerness for the post-bag ; he craved to know whether to-day brought any accession to yesterday's load

of care, and he craved also for his wife's letter, the momentary relief of his dreary days and nights. One day, shortly after the cavalry ball at Paharnauth, when, with shaking hands and blood-shot eyes, after a night of exhausting unrest, he was running his letters over to find that which he always read first—his wife's,—he came upon one addressed to him in a peculiar straight hand, which he never remembered seeing before. "Ah! there's dear Flora's letter! but whom can this be from? Paharnauth post mark too! Not Stapleton, not the Padre; and who is there else to write to me? Perhaps some bill or other my wife forgot to pay—however, it must wait." And he read Flora's letter—it desired him to prepare in a mysterious way, to hear some joyful news from Beauclerc Cottage; "but the young lady must write to you herself." "One of the girls going to be married, I suppose," he said aloud, in explanation to himself. "I wonder Flora cannot tell me more about it; she does not even say which: it must be Esther."

The rest of Flora's letter was in the usual strain, begging of him to come before they were shut up

in the house by the rains. The pleased expression which his face wore while he was reading the letter faded away as he closed it and put it aside with a sigh; his happiness for that twenty-four hours was over—ah, yes! and for hundreds of hours more: for he must now read the letter in the strange hand. He first noticed that it had no date, and next that it had no address or signature; it was, in fact, an anonymous letter. This is a copy of it,—

“You had better look after your wife, Mr. Ochter, if you take any interest in her doings, that is; if you don’t, the gallant Captain Stapleton does: a few weeks ago, they were seen kissing each other affectionately on the Mall, as nearly everybody in Paharnauth knows. This looks as if they were on pretty good terms with each other. I think you have as much title to be made aware of their little Platonic friendship as anybody; and so I do you the favour of informing you of it, in case you should wish to interfere. You may not be inclined to believe me, because I do not trouble you with my name: but if you have any doubts, you

can easily refer to some one you know at Pahar-nauth."

Lony Ochter read this communication twice through, and then he sat down to his desk and read it a third time, putting his trembling forefinger under each word in succession, like a child, or a very old man. This vile letter, written in an evidently disguised hand, coarse and brutal in its language,—would not the simplest man decide in a moment that it was the production of some scoundrel's pen, to be torn up immediately and forgotten as soon as possible? Is it probable that the true-hearted Lony Ochter can be affected by a composition like this? You and I, my friend, if questioned, would positively declare that no anonymous letter could disturb our equanimity, though I doubt very much whether the most powerful mind is entirely proof against such influence; but we must not argue from ourselves to a man so harassed, so far below himself as Lony Ochter has been for many weeks. He struggled against the terrible sensations the letter stirred up for a short time; but by degrees, when he recollected

the petty anxiety this very Stapleton had caused him a very short time after his marriage, the conviction that the tidings must be true stole over his diseased brain. Poor Ochter was not at the time in a condition to appreciate the unspeakable folly on his part of yielding credence to this most scandalous accusation, on such evidence as that before him. He made no attempt to analyze, or better still, to shake off the impression. His mind, weakened by previous anxieties and troubles, by want of sleep and rest, as well as by the other agencies I have mentioned, could only lay hold of two points: one, that Stapleton's manner to Flora had excited his suspicion before; the other, that their going to Paharnauth together was preconcerted.

Having persuaded himself of these facts, he, without further consideration, decided that he was a dishonoured, trebly betrayed man. He took much less time proving this to himself, as he sat at his desk with his forehead pressed into the palm of his hand, than I take to write it. He felt astonished somehow at his own calmness, as he asked himself,

“What ought I to do?” In his state, he was not long determining on a course of action; he would drive over to Mr. Ullney’s quietly, and ask for a few days’ leave to Paharnauth. He thought he could do nothing better than this; and from that moment not a doubt as to the truth of the contents of the letter crossed his mind. He dressed and drove over, as he proposed, to Mr. Ullney’s house. He rarely made his appearance there: consequently, it astonished Mr. Ullney a good deal to see him come uninvited. As he entered the room, it struck the magistrate that there was a strangeness in his manner, and an uncertainty in his gait, which he could only associate with intoxication. “He surely cannot have been drinking so early,” thought Mr. Ullney, as he asked him coldly to sit down, and stared at him inquiringly. There was something peculiar in the expression of Lony Ochter’s face too, he thought, over and above his haggard look, which latter Mr. Ullney was quite accustomed to.

“I want you to give me a short leave to go to Paharnauth, on very urgent business: very urgent! very urgent!” he repeated, looking not at the

magistrate, but at some mysterious object beyond him, with a dull vacant stare. He then became silent; but his lips, and occasionally his hands, quivered a good deal. Mr. Ullney believed that he must be drunk, or still suffering from the effects of his last night's debauch. So he replied,—

“I can't give you leave, Ochter, you know. You must forward to me an application in the regular way, and I will send it on. You had better not come to Cutcherry to-day. You are not looking at all well.”

When the magistrate began to speak, Ochter appeared to listen; but before his few words were ended, it was evident to him that Ochter was not attending to what he said.

“Come, Ochter,” said the magistrate, rising and approaching him, “let me help you to your buggy, and go home. Your syce can drive you. We will see about the leave hereafter.”

“Yes! the leave. I may go, you say: I must go,” and he repeated the last words over and over, making no resistance, however, to Mr. Ullney, who helped him out of the house: he was too intoxicated

to walk, so the magistrate fancied. He got him into the buggy, and desired the syce to sit beside him and drive his master home. He told him at the same time to give his order to the house servants, not to supply any more liquor to their master. The distance from the magistrate's to Ochter's house was not very great: the horse got over the ground quickly; the buggy stopped sharp at the door; and its owner lurched suddenly forward, and fell out of it, sun-stricken. Exhausted physically and mentally, the shock he had that morning received stunned him so completely that the blazing June sun had a very easy victim in the man, who, only the year before, shot snipe all day in April in Bengal, up to his waist in a jheel, and had never known a headache. Total insensibility was a blessed state for him compared with that which went before. Physical pain and mental anguish were gone together; and there are many states of mind and body, for which total negation of thought and feeling is not an undesirable exchange. The frightened servants bore their master in, and, having laid him on his bed, fled in different directions for

help. Before the only medical man in the station could be found, Henry Lony Ochter had neared very closely to the dread shores of Acheron—"dread" as we esteem them, but not so to those who die as he was pronounced to be dying: for in such persons life merges into death as imperceptibly as is the passage from light slumber to profound sleep. Hurled suddenly down by his malady from the highest to the lowest grade of animal creation, he was perishing with less sensation or cognizance of change than the sea-anemone feels when left behind by the treacherous tide to fade and shrivel on the fast drying sand.

Huddee at first sight declared him beyond the reach of human help, to the terror of Ullney, whom he found sitting by Ochter's bed-side, gazing in helpless dismay at the shocking sight before him: the wretched man fancied himself in some way instrumental in bringing Ochter to this woful pass. No wonder Huddee muttered, "All up!" in a low voice. We hush our voices instinctively in the presence of the dead and the dying, without thinking why we do so. The flies were resting on the widely opened eye, from which the powerless lids had fallen

away; and to the unpractised observer the death stamp seemed impressed upon every line of the expressionless features. There was, however, a less decided look of despair upon the doctor's face when he had concluded his examination, and he set to work to apply remedies. Hour after hour he lay, motionless and unconscious, while the magistrate sat by watching, fully aware how needless his presence was, yet unable to drag himself away; while the doctor, everything that he could do, done, watched with him, drearily longing for some change. Night had long fallen ere some indistinct muttering from the patient's lips struck the ears of both; and, taking advantage of them, Huddee, who was anxious to get the other away, pronounced a much more hopeful opinion than he really held. It had the desired result: Mr. Ullney went to his own house with something like a prayer of thankfulness issuing from his lips.

It was no fault of his that he had so grievously mistaken Lony Ochter's condition that morning; but he was conscious of a malevolent spirit of persecution within him, which had guided his judgment, or

rather misled it. But for it, he might have averted the calamity. Why his assistant wanted leave to Paharnauth so badly he could not discover. The Skewbalds did not know either. Huddee, who did not leave during the night, and who heard, in the slow restoration of his patient, his murmuring gradually changed to ravings and wild delirium, could have made a pretty accurate conjecture, even if he had not read the anonymous letter which he found firmly clenched in his patient's hand. He had no difficulty in recognizing a letter in the same hand-writing, brought by the next morning's post, which he thought himself justified in securing, and another, and a fourth, on successive mornings. The struggles of a man in a high brain fever, however weak he may be, are sometimes frightful; and so they were with his patient.

By the evening of the third day good Mrs. Armit was at Lony Ochter's bedside. She left Nakpore the day the intelligence reached her. The good woman could give little help, for here, not gentle nursing, but the arms and hands of powerful men who could hold the unhappy sufferer down were

constantly needed. Food and medicine were administered in the face of dreadful cries and struggles to be free. His eyes were never closed, his tongue was never still for six days and nights. He recognized nobody and said little that was intelligible, fortunately, beyond shouting out his wife's name and another's, of which but the medical man knew the import. Towards the evening of the seventh day, when his surviving so long without sleeping was becoming a miracle in the doctor's eyes, and when there were signs of extreme exhaustion as far as muscular efforts went : for now he could be easily held down : he was lying on his back gazing vacantly upwards and mumbling in a very low tone, with his fingers straying upon the counterpane. His head was shaved, and one or two thin lines of dark blood, from ill-stopped leech-bites, were trickling slowly down his face. It was a painful sight, and one which could not be coolly surveyed by most men.

The yellow light of the sinking sun found its way into the rooms through the widely-open doors, and illuminated all within it strangely. Mrs. Armit was endeavouring to snatch some rest in an adjoining

apartment, for she was worn out by watching and by sorrow. She was awakened by Dr. Huddee's voice, entreating some one earnestly not to enter the sick man's chamber just then ; but the intruder was not to be hindered, and Flora, for it was she, haggard-looking and travel-worn, saying to the doctor gently, "Do not be afraid, I will take care not to disturb him," approached the foot of the bed, and stood there for a moment with her eyes fixed upon her husband's face. Discovering at once that as he lay he could not see her, and impelled by some wild desire of his recognizing her, she passed on, Huddee creeping behind on tiptoe ; and when she reached the head of his couch, she stooped over him, bringing her face close to his. The doctor, watching his patient's face closely, saw his lips quivering a little, and his eyes, hitherto vacant, looking with a new light in them on the streaming face above him.

"He knows her, by G—d," almost shouted the medical man, rendered temporarily regardless of caution in his speech by the new hope the patient's movement gave him.

We may hope that the oath which burst from him

in his delight met with no more reception at heaven's Chancery than a certain other oath of a similar character, the particulars of which have been before the public for the last century.

Flora, feeling her shoulders gently touched, raised her face up, but, almost blinded by tears though she was, she could discern the glance of her husband following her : she turned and fell upon her mother's neck, who could only say, " My darling, thank God you are come!" and then wept with her. Mrs. Armit with difficulty persuaded Flora to accompany her into another room, until she became calmer ; and there they were presently joined by a girl with a plain sad face, who crept in and asked whether she could be of any use.

" Do not try to check her tears, ma'am. These are the first she has shed since we left Paharnauth. Oh ! how she suffered on the way."

Mrs. Armit did not require to be told that this was Louisa Ochter.

" I may go in again now, mamma," said Flora, her paroxysm of weeping over ; " I cannot bear to be away from him."

She would not hear of food or rest, and became so excited at any appearance of opposition, that her mother considered it safer to let her do as she asked. As she approached the bedside again, although it was nearly dark, she persuaded herself that her husband's eyes turned towards her. She sat down close by with her hands clasped on her lap, almost convulsively, and it was well that the gloom hid the despairingly sad expression into which her features were gathered as she commenced her silent watch. The doctor came in shortly after, and she said, almost in a husky voice,—

“For God's sake, let me do something for him! oh! can I do nothing?”

“You have done him a million times more good already than I have with all my physics, Mrs. Ochter. Remember that. But won't you take some rest after your journey?” he answered, in as cheery a tone as he could.

“I need no rest, indeed I do not. Oh! let me do something,” said Flora, in eager entreaty.

“Of course you shall, but you must not wear yourself out too soon. Sit here, close by him, and

rub this gently across his brows and around his head, until it appears to lose its cold, and then you will get another. I declare he is looking at you now."

As he spoke, he placed in her hand a little bag containing artificial ice, and Flora did immediately as he asked her.

Hour after hour did Flora sit, moving her hand, with its soothing burden, over that fevered brow, absorbed in her task, and refusing obstinately to be relieved.

"Oh! that his eyes would only close!" She looked over into them now and then, and badly as the room was lit, she was cheered by an unaccountable feeling of certainty that he was conscious who was tending him. Huddee had not happened to try this particular remedy before the night of Flora's arrival, and his faith in it was perhaps grounded less on its efficacy than on his hope that Lony Ochter knew, dim as his perceptions were, what hand it was that applied it. The spell worked slowly but surely, whatever its mode of operation. The low raving began to subside and soon ceased

altogether; the hitherto restless fingers moved no more; later still, the eyelids approached each other and partially closed; and Flora, full of dread that her ears were deceiving her, heard, just as dawn broke, the soft, low sough of her husband's first slumber. She looked inquiringly at Huddee, whom she discovered standing by her side. After watching for a moment to satisfy himself, he whispered: "Yes, you have saved his life."

The doctor was intensely disgusted with himself afterwards, when he remembered what he said. He had actually uttered what he thought for once, contrary to the great guiding principle of the illustrious guild of surgeons and barbers. "What a brick that woman is!" he said to himself, as he left the room. "Think of some lying beast writing that letter of such a wife as this! I never saw anybody equal to her! Dare say she has not closed an eye since she heard of his illness! I wish I hadn't read that infernal paper, with more lies than lines in it, and what am I to do with the three others? Damnable world this is, to be sure!" Washing down this wholesome, but unpleasant reflection,

with a gulp or two of some fluid, in a flask, half wicker and half pewter—probably cold tea to keep him awake: though it had not quite the same smell—and feeling much easier, with regard to the sick man within, than he had ever felt before, Huddee thought he could smoke a cheroot, and did; indulging, while it lasted, in a nicotian revery upon the unfailing happiness that man must enjoy who is blest with such a wife as Lony Ochter's. "As for the anonymous letter,—she must have snubbed some d—— fellow awfully, and he did this blackguard trick by way of revenge. It will be pleasant for him to hear all the mischief it has done; but Lony Ochter was going to the devil some way, long before it reached him, and he must have broken down, letter or no letter. I don't half understand it myself;" and he flung his cheroot away, and dozed in his chair until sunrise.

If he could only have guessed what words of comfort the last he whispered to her were to Flora, he surely would not have wished them unsaid!

A hurried note from Mrs. Skewbald, informing her that her husband was given over, and that his

illness had been preceded by severe mental distress, put into her hand at a moment she was enjoying herself to the utmost, had given her, cold and strong-minded as she was, a shock, from which nothing but an assurance like Huddee's could have rallied her. Her sorrow, if not her sin, was that of a Magdalene. In that solitary nursing vigil on the night of her return, how cruelly, how pitilessly towards herself, did she run over the events of her life from the first morning she drove into Chillum-pore! there was nothing in the interval she could think of without a shudder. Had she not commenced by marrying, without a particle of real regard, him whom she was watching over now, and to save whose life she would give even her own? Her every careless thought and speech, her scarce concealed indifference, her reckless extravagance, her love for the admiration of others, not disguised from the one man who valued her, worthless as she was, above aught else in the world—how she shrank from herself as she recalled all!

As her reflections advanced to matters less remote—to her wilful journey to Paharnauth to get away

from him—to the preference she permitted to find its way into her heart, even before she left his roof, for the conversation and society of another—to her almost guilty jealousy, when she discovered that that other cared not for her—she could not but feel her present sufferings only a just retribution. She did not know yet of that effort of malice by which her husband was crushed and the idea of which her light conduct had suggested; had she known it—could she have guessed that the last moments of consciousness, possessed by her husband's brain, were darkened by the conviction that she had sinned beyond all pardoning—not even the knowledge of her innocence would have sustained her; the agony of feeling that she herself was mainly to blame for his lying there, a shattered, helpless wreck, in addition to the bitter self-accusation we find her giving way to, would have been too severe a tax upon her powers of endurance, great as they were.

As we see, however, she was spared this Nemesis for the present.

When the strain upon her mind was taken off by the doctor's reassuring words, the cloud of misery

which enshrouded her began to clear away; and she felt, for the first time since she left Paharnauth, fatigued and worn out, and capable of rest. When, therefore, Huddee said to her, in the early morning, "Now you have done miracles! Mrs. Armit will take charge during the day; and unless you rest you will be fit for nothing at night, when you will be required again. I know when he awakes you will be astonished at the change for the better, but you must have some repose at once:" she allowed herself to be relieved, almost gladly. Throughout the day she slept heavily, and she rose refreshed in the evening to hear the joyful news that her husband awoke calm after a short and light slumber, had taken nourishment willingly, and had spoken a few intelligible syllables for the first time. Louisa told her this as she helped her to dress. How tranquil and grateful she felt!

CHAPTER VI.

FLETUS GEMITUSQUE.

SOME eight days after that important event—Mr. Secretary McCuddum's proposal for Esther—Colonel Budlee and his son were seated in the verandah of their house, surveying with a very discontented expression on both their faces the rather limited landscape Vacluse estate commanded. It was a little after sunset, and a thunder-storm of the usual Himalaya quality was just clearing off: grumbling all the time amongst the distant hills, as if annoyed at having its sport stopped so soon. It was merely an *avant goût* of the approaching rains, equivalent to what are called the "little rains" in the plains of the Bengal Presidency and the mango showers in Madras (this latter is rather a strange designation, as it would lead one to suppose

that the showers are only intended for the benefit of the mangoes). The downpour had the effect of keeping Colonel Budlee at home for the evening, an arrangement he did not at all approve of. He had engaged to dine with half-a-dozen old friends at the Kilta: he had made no preparations for passing the evening at home; his son promised to be but very indifferent company; and he was certain of having nothing to eat worth eating. No wonder, then, that the colonel was rather peevish. He would not have minded the rain, but then of late years damp disagreed with him, and he could not consider himself sufficiently secure in a jampan against a week's rheumatism if he were to venture out.

As for the son, the colonel had noticed, with a moderate amount of paternal anxiety, that he had very much changed of late. He scarcely ever passed within the door of that palace of joys (to all except the original members) the Kilta Club; his fond father never noticed him at any of the billiard tables, or amongst the numerous card parties; and that gentleman, who was not aware of the very

cogent reasons his son had in avoiding the club, at first considered it a sign of very serious import.

Some time has now elapsed since the colonel flattered himself that he had found out the cause of the change in the youngster's habits, and he often thought with pity over his infatuation. Some advice which he attempted to tender, was most undutifully received. His son "had resolved to make a fool of himself by hanging about and trying to make up to a girl, who, even if she herself was weak enough to look at him, had a deuced sensible mother to keep her in order; and it was no use for him, Colonel Budlee, to try to interfere. He had spoken once or twice with the most disinterested motives, and he could not be expected to give himself more trouble on account of a young scamp who all but 'd—d his eyes' to his face."

The last piece of station news both gentlemen had heard was that Miss Ochter was to be married to Mr. McCuddum in three weeks. This appeared so probable to the elder that he did not doubt it

for a moment, especially as it chimed in with his own hopes of being able to make a more rapid advance to the capture of the buxom widow, now that one of her encumbrances was off her hands.

For some time past the colonel had given up the siege almost entirely, because he saw clearly that Mrs. Ochter was so absorbed in husband-hunting for her daughters, that she did not appear to understand the object of his approaches, which he did not at all mean to disguise.

It was evidently Colonel Budlee's theory about women, that they are ready to marry up to any age and weight, provided the offer is made by a person of agreeable manners, respectable position in society, and a not repulsive appearance. The colonel did not, he believed, flatter himself in supposing that, in the above triad of qualifications, he was not by any means deficient. Esther's speedy marriage removed one very great hindrance to his proceedings. He therefore felt certain of it, and duly prayed for its accomplishment.

Budlee junior, on the contrary, gloomy as he looked, did not believe that Esther had accepted

Mr. McCuddum. He had been much with the Beauclerc girls, and had heard Esther's opinion rather freely expressed once or twice on the secretary (this young lady was not at all prudent at times, and she was found wanting in that maidenly reserve and cautious silence by which highly refined and well-brought up young ladies are characterized). The poor wretch Budlee had too great a respect for his goddess to believe that she could ever be induced to marry McCuddum, to say nothing of the hold which, until lately, the self-deluded lover fancied he had on Esther's affections. He believed that he was a great favourite of Mrs. Ochter's, and that her daughter looked upon him more warmly than on any of the other fellows fluttering around her. After his "row," as he called it, with Mrs. Flora at the cavalry ball, he resolved, in addition to bestowing upon the latter lady such punishment as she deserved, to ask Esther what her ideas of a matrimonial connection with him at some future day might be. He calculated upon a most gratifying answer, and, hearing of the picnic at Lovesmere in prospect, he made up a little plan for

declaring himself there. He could easily lure her off to look at the horse chesnuts, or the wild roses, or "some damn thing of that sort," as he felicitously expressed it to himself, and then reveal his love.

His misery can be imagined when other people got their invitations, but none came for him; he felt that there must be some mistake—they could not mean to leave him out. But, alas! so it was; the day came and passed, and he was ignominiously forgotten. "More of Flora's doing." It will be easily understood, then, that from this cause, if there were no other, he might be expected to be rather crest-fallen on this particular evening. His father, to whom silence was always a punishment, resolved to make the best of the discomforts he had to endure, and to have a chat with his son, however distasteful conversation might be to that young officer; he accordingly said,—

"How is it, Ned, you have not got a word to say for yourself? Shall we make a run for it to the club? you may come and dine there with me if you like."

"Not I; I don't intend to go out at all this evening."

"Great mistake shutting yourself up in the house, I can tell you. Has anything more been heard about young Ochter?"

"Who? the civilian, the virtuous Flora's husband? what about him?"

"Why, hang it! haven't you heard? Every one in Paharnauth is talking about it. There, you see you lose quite a heart-rending——"

"What the deuce is it?" said the son, impatiently interrupting his worthy sire in the most undutiful manner.

The latter, whose temper would not have tolerated master Ned's impertinence on any other occasion, sacrificed his paternal feelings for the sake of having somebody to talk to on this, and instead of noticing the very great breach of filial politeness on the younger's part, he went on.

"The day of the picnic, to which by the way we were not asked, as we ought to have been, a letter from Chillumpore came, just when young Mrs. Ochter was polkaing, to say that her husband,

upset by some mental distress, had had a sun-stroke and was given over."

"Oh, my—all right, go on," said the son, suppressing with no small effort, an ejaculation which struck his father as likely to be more vehement than the occasion required.

The colonel, though unable to understand this, considered it safer not to notice it, and continued:—"And was not likely to survive many hours. This news sent all the people flying, of course. They said she bore it wonderfully, and gad, sir! she started off for the plains in an hour afterwards; one of his sisters, I forget which, went with her."

"Anything heard since?" young Budlee asked, but with such an altered voice that his father was quite startled by it, and could not forbear looking at his son for a moment or two in silence.

Young Budlee, though his face could not be clearly seen in the dusk, betrayed so much anxiety in the tone he spoke in, that his not very soft-hearted father felt for him.

"Yes! Russud told me yesterday that another letter came for Flora, which they opened. He was

still alive, to the surprise of everybody. Russud said that McCuddum was in the devil of a way. His marriage must be put off on account of the family grief, and he wants to get back to his work, as if the existence of all India depended upon the secretary to the Momjamma Board. Devilish good match for her—but it is a pity to see so fine a girl tied to such an ugly ‘son of a gun’ as that.”

Colonel Budlee put a stop to his comments here, for he discovered that he had no listener; his son had gone.

“Hanged if I can make that boy out,” was the senior’s first reflection. “If he were a thousand times more madly infatuated about that girl than he is (the young ass! he didn’t care a damn for what I said weeks ago), still that is no reason for his being so upset by this young Ochter’s death, as I suppose it is now. He has never seen the man, and as for his wife, she don’t deserve much pity, if half what we hear is true.”

Colonel Budlee’s belief was, that sitting out of doors in the dark, on a damp, chilly night, was not only not prudent for a man of his years, but enough

to give any one the blue devils, and the company of those melancholic imps was particularly abhorrent to one of Colonel Budlee's genial temperament. So he determined that it was time to see what "his brutes" were going to give him to eat. His "brutes" had prepared a repast for him quite equal to his expectations; but before he set himself to investigate its nature closely, he thought of his son, and ordered him to be summoned; but he got a message back to the effect that he, Budlee junior, had already dined.

"Off his feed still," the colonel murmured to himself. "Needn't have lied about it, though, for the benefit of the servants. Well, if he doesn't choose to keep me company, I can manage without him." So he sat down to dine, in a very indifferent humour indeed.

Such food as the Indian exile obtains, on a short notice, in a bachelor household, is enough to disturb the equanimity of the most sweet-tempered of men, supposing him to have the smallest regard for his suffering palate and much enduring stomach, and it is certain to exasperate uncommonly the man

who sits down to partake of it with a bad temper and worse appetite; under both these latter affections our colonel was labouring, when, waiving the ceremony of grace, he ordered the covers to be removed. Having partly with his optic, partly with his olfactory nerves, made himself acquainted with the contents of each dish, he turned round in his chair, as a man will do under similar aggravating circumstances, and asked the trembling native behind him,—

“What was there for dinner?”

The only answer he could elicit to this question being a hasty enumeration of the different luxuries before him, the colonel sat silent and composed for a moment, deliberating within himself whether it was worth his while to take the trouble to “give him the most infernal licking he ever had in his life,” or not. Having decided in the negative, as the man would, when sufficiently beaten, decamp temporarily (not permanently, for his wages were eight months in arrear), and leave him to the inconvenience of waiting upon himself, the colonel blew off a quantity of very vigorous Hindo-

stane, and again resumed the examination of his meal.

The only peculiarity that renders this little mental contest of the colonel's worth mentioning is, that he was one of those men who "never touched their servants;" you are always meeting those amiable fellows, young and old, who proclaim aloud their Christian forbearance in the matter of natives; but if you inquire, you will infallibly discover that they are always thrashing them without mercy. Was it not whispered that the great Rasool himself, he who held our ferocious cruelty to our black brethren up to the execration of the world, was notorious in the head-quarters' camp for his unmerciful—but let me not repeat the calumnious statement, for am I not convinced that there is not a word of truth in it?

Poor Colonel Budlee was really to be pitied, accustomed as he was to the privations we must all endure in this land of misery. On one dish were four substances of forbidding colour, from each of which three inches of perfectly bare bone protruded; they were of the size and shape of an

old-fashioned watch : he did not require to be told that they were "potato-chaup;" he did not require to be informed that he would discover, on dividing one of them, or tearing off the outer crust, in the centre of each, a shrivelled mass of the colour, flavour, and consistency of wet leather. He, whose exquisite stews had an India-wide reputation, knew too well that under a flimsy disguise of burnt mashed potato, he was expected to eat goat. Shuddering with natural horror, he turned to another dish, in which several black islands of an irregular outline were floating in an ocean of a brownish fluid, smelling distinctly of tallow candle snuff: the word "mutuncutlate," pronounced in an anxious tone behind him, was not necessary to render him confident that these were derived from the same ruminant's flesh as that which entered into the first dish, but reduced in this latter case to such a state of unnatural softness as to lead any inquiring person to believe, that it must have been subjected to a process of preliminary mastication. Let us drop the curtain on Colonel Budlee's sorrows—for are they not familiar to us all?—and turn to his

son's, which are, it may be hoped, not so. Compelled to dine upon a crust, and the remains of an ancient foie-gras, saved since his last tiffin-party, the colonel, oppressed by his own misery, had no solicitude to spare for his son, and quite forgot all about him.

"The greatest scoundrels," some good authority upon the subject states, "have no consciences." Fine as this may be, the deficiency is very well supplied, in the great and at the same time cowardly scoundrel, by a certain depressing passion, known in plain English as fear, and in low and rather slangy English as "funk."

It is Lieutenant Budlee's misfortune to be very much under its influence at the present moment, and so strong is its hold upon him that he has forgotten the despair into which he was driven by his exclusion from the Lovesmere picnic, and the threatened marriage of Esther, and which had been preying upon him until he heard his father's news.

Belonging to a brave and honourable profession, he was by no means a brave and honourable man,

and he had, a short time ago, carried along by a senseless rage against a woman who betrayed her dislike to him, committed an act which the most cowardly and honourless of men might well be ashamed of. It is not pleasant to picture him lying on his bed in the dark, at one time muttering curses upon himself and at another thinking, in silent terms, what infamy a discovery would bring upon him. There was nothing like repentance, nothing like shame or sorrow, for his act because of the guilt of it; he had not, it need not be said, once thought of the difference between right and wrong since his young school-boy days, when it was constantly being impressed upon him by that stinging *argumentum ad juvenem maleficum*, a stout cane: that stimulus to morality removed, the distinction gave him no more uneasiness. He had achieved a very respectable quantum of villanies, but the remembrance of them never gave him a twinge of regret, for he felt sure that they had not been found out; but he could not persuade himself that he was safe from discovery as far as his last effort was concerned. The mental distress which

his father mentioned as connected with Ochter's sun-stroke was his little doing.

Flora would no doubt receive the other letters, read them, and guess at once who wrote them all. She would get the first one too, probably. If he, Budlee, were able to see Flora and Stapleton that evening on the road, was it not likely that they saw him, that is, recognized him? What he said in the first letter would be enough of itself, then, to mark him out. She had pluck enough for anything, and would not care a straw about exposure for the sake of punishing him. Her husband, killed by his lies, for such he did not scruple to call them now, she would leave no stone unturned to find him out and prove it against him.

How wretched and transparent all the precautions he had taken against discovery seemed to him now! Any one who knew how things stood before the letters were despatched would put his hand upon him as the writer in a moment.

He lay for many hours in a state of mind, a faint notion of which may be obtained from the sketch of his reflections. He strained his ingenuity to one

point—how could he get out of it? how could he secure himself against inquiry? His fright at the, as he believed, death of Lony Ochter, so paralyzed his intellect, that he lost all clue to the line of reasoning by which he clearly demonstrated to himself before he played his devil's trick that the tracing of it to him was out of the question. He now thought that he was in such a rage with Flora at the time he wrote, that he did not consider what he was doing, or what a tremendous risk he ran. He suggested to himself a dozen ingenious ways by which the mischief might be brought home to him. True, he took the letters to the post office himself, he would not trust them to a servant's hand; yet the native in charge might have been struck by the singularity of his bringing a letter on four successive occasions: he may have noticed the disguised handwriting of the address; he may have been tempted to open one, or, at least, he might have noted one particularly, and might identify it afterwards as having been posted by him. Young Budlee was not slow in acquiring the art of self-torture; he could think of ever so many different ways by which he

might be brought to grief, but not one of any value by which he might protect himself. On ordinary occasions he could deceive and mislead to perfection; but he felt that if he were to be taxed with this, his manner would betray him in a moment.

I cannot expect my readers to have any pity for Mr. Budlee; they may have a little for Captain Stapleton, who, they will remember, on the night he committed himself with Flora, much more irretrievably than he supposed, pronounced a sentence of voluntary exile from Beauclerc Cottage society against himself; he has not since taken "a ticket of leave" even for an hour. Firmly as he resolved to think no more of his love for Esther, the more firmly, as invariably happens when such heroic resolutions are made, did the Eidolon of this young lady adhere to him. He never ceased endeavouring to argue it off, by assuring himself that Esther had not the remotest feeling towards him; that even if she had, he could not be base enough to snare such an angel, debt-ridden, reckless devil as he was; that, even if he were base enough, her friends were not as demented as to permit their union; that, seeing

that she was engaged to Mr. McCuddum (for Stapleton heard this report, like the Budlees, and believed it) and would be married immediately, it was obvious no other arguments were necessary to bring about the Eidolon's departure; yet the Eidolon would remain. He tried the Kilta for a day or two, but he lost so many tricks at whist, and so wantonly, that old Tass, who was his partner, declined, in the middle of a game, to play another card with him, and cut him the next time they met, believing very naturally that Stapleton was in a conspiracy with their adversaries against him, Tass, and should therefore be treated as a blackleg. At billiards he fared no better; a very good player he was looked upon, but he missed the simplest strokes, cut the cloth of the best table twice in an afternoon, and was laughed at in public by an ensign. He resolved to take up his cousins, the Misses Gingall, to escort them solemnly about the Mall, and to endure any quantity of their silly, stupid chatter, with noble constancy.

As an immediate result of this idea, the poor girls attracted public notice, and the witty young fellows

of the Kilta invented an appropriate nickname for them without delay. Such ladies as knew Captain Stapleton and his cousins said, that "it was very creditable to him to be kind to the poor Gingalls, but that it was strange he had not taken any notice of them before." He had done so before once only, when he took the female part of the Gingall household to call at Beauclerc Cottage; but the girls of the latter contrasted so strongly with his cousins, he was so covered with shame by the nonsense they spoke when talked to, that he dropped them immediately, vowing never to take them up any more. This vow he religiously kept, until he thought of accompanying them, as a sort of penance for himself and to frighten off the Eidolon.

During the greater part of the day, finding Rocklodge unbearable from the smells and cries of the divers beasts and birds maintained close round the house, he made off on long solitary walks in the hills, fancying that he enjoyed the scenery, and the dangerous paths tracked all over with the footmarks of pheasants, and looking as if they were intended for no other description of travellers. He dragged

himself up, and let himself down the steep sides of ravines and precipices for no particular reason that he knew of, and after remaining out for hours came home thoroughly fagged, having seen nothing which really interested him. One good he gained from this; he managed to make himself so exhausted, that he could eat and sleep afterwards with comparative comfort. Great fatigue, like sea sickness, is a temporary remedy for such an affection as Stapleton was suffering from. He heard, in due course, of the sorrow which had come upon his friends at Beaucherc Cottage. He was sorry for Ochter to the extent to which men's sorrow for each other reaches, and that is not far.

A man in the Army or Civil Service of India has one more satisfaction in dying than those have who live independently, or by professions or trade. It must be a comfort to him in his last moments to know that his removal will delight somebody, to think that he is making room, perhaps, for some poor devil whom promotion will rescue from starvation. The higher he stands upon his list, the larger the number of those who will be benefited and consequently the

greater the amount of rejoicing there will be at his decease. Strange, then, that no one ever enjoys the prospect of being "scratched out." It would be very difficult to persuade a gouty old bachelor colonel, who has been in the way for a quarter of a century, and who is without kith and kin, that positively nobody will mourn for him, and that very many will be made glad when Charon hails him. One would fancy that the fewer there are to mourn for a person, the more contentedly he ought to leave the world. But the very reverse seems to be the fact; it appears to give a sort of melancholy satisfaction to a man on his death-bed to feel, that he will be styled "a great loss," and will be wept for in proportion.

What all this has to do with the last-mentioned fact, that Stapleton bore the reputed death of Lony Ochter with much equanimity, the reader may be at a loss to know; so am I when I come to read it over. Stapleton felt it much more than he would otherwise have done, because the Eidolon was a sister of poor Ochter; and when he heard in due time that he was likely to recover, he rejoiced on that account also. Stapleton might have been expected to have mourned

much, seeing that they were great friends, in the Indian sense of the word. They rode, and ate, and drank, and smoked together, and took pleasure in each other's company while Ochter's bachelor days lasted ; but at the very highest point of their friendship one would have followed the other to the grave dutifully, and then gone back to the auction of his friend's effects, forgetting his grief, in the agreeable prospect of being able to purchase the dead man's horse, or his rifle, or his buggy, or anything else which the survivor had previously coveted.

CHAPTER VII.

ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

LONG OCHTER, from the date of Flora's return, crept slowly back into life. He lingered long in the valley of the shadow of death, and his wife had many an hour of sorrowful suspense to pass before she could feel assured that they were not yet to be parted. If Flora felt shocked at finding him looking so aged and shattered after, as she thought, a very brief illness, her mother was no less alarmed at the sad alteration she noticed at first sight, in her daughter. During the sorrowful journey from the Hills intense anxiety had banished sleep and appetite; it was hopeless for her to try even to rest. Louisa, seeing how she suffered at the least delay, made no effort on her own account to restrain Flora. The former cheerfully endured the fatigue of constant travelling,

trying as it was at that season; and though not over strong, she did not appear to have been much affected by it. It was far different with Flora; with eyes sunken and circled by dark lines, cheek bones prominent, and an expression at once haggard and excited, she seemed to Mrs. Armit like one just risen from a tedious illness, still fevered and weak

Was this the blooming girl, whom she had left only a few months before so well and so happy? What would have been this mother's woe if she knew that the shocking change had taken place in a few days and nights of mental strain: for she was in the best health and spirits up to the evening the tidings of her husband's illness had been communicated to her. Mrs. Armit saw, too, with increased uneasiness, that Flora's spirits were unaccountably depressed, even after she was assured by Dr. Huddee that her husband was out of danger. She was composed and more like her former self, to be sure; but her brow was never smooth when not in attendance on her husband; she used to shut herself up in her own room, and appeared to avoid even her mother's company. She could not induce her to talk for any

time; and it was with great difficulty that she could be got to partake even of the smallest quantity of food.

As Lony Ochter got better, Flora's depression increased. She began to show a disinclination to sit by him, except at night; and the most trifling question from him, feebly but kindly spoken, appeared to distress her beyond bearing; from night-fall to daybreak was her watch time. Nothing would induce her to leave him during those long and weary hours. In his convalescence he slept long and quietly while she sat by, upright and wakeful, long after there was any need of such close attendance, her face resting on her right hand and her left palm supporting her right elbow: her mother, who insisted upon looking in now and then, wondered to see her in the same attitude, motionless as a stone figure, until daylight. When her husband awoke, every day more refreshed, and more anxious to speak and be spoken to, she was fretful and restless until she could get away, to appear as little as possible during the day, but ready for her post when night fell again. To see this was enough to damp all good Mrs.

Armit's joy at her son's recovery; she tried to coax Flora to tell her why she was so unhappy.

"You have no longer cause for sorrow, thank God, my darling. Dear Henry is fast getting back his strength, and he quite pines to have you near him during the day. He declares, and Dr. Huddee thinks so too, that there is not the slightest occasion for your wearing yourself out by sitting up at night any longer. He says he would get better much quicker, poor fellow, if you would give him his meals every day and stay with him; and Flora, my darling," continued poor Mrs. Armit with a rush of tears into her eyes, "I cannot tell you how it pains me even more than his illness did when it was at the worst, to see my dearest girl so gloomy and sad; you could not look more heart-broken, my dear child, if it pleased God to take him altogether from you."

"Don't, don't, for Heaven's sake! Pity me, oh pity me!" Flora cried wildly, and then came storm of cries of despair and weeping.

Mrs. Armit, almost terrified at the distracted state her few words caused Flora to get into, did not ven-

ture to press her again; but she became every day more uneasy. Flora had naturally great strength of mind, and her powers of enduring trouble and suffering were greater than most women are endowed with; but the tax upon them at this time was too much even for her. That sweet-dispositioned lady, Mrs. Skewbald, and another Chillumpore lady, whom my readers merely know by name, Mrs. Kookrie, had correspondents at Paharnauth (for who is there without dearest friends at that joyous refuge during the season?) and they had both been made happy long ago by very glowing descriptions of young Mrs. Ochter's doings. I write doings "advisedly:" for although my reader, and I, the historian, know of but one doing, and that as innocent and harmless as may be, yet it need not be mentioned that a magnificent structure of scandalous material can be and is every day constructed upon a much slighter foundation than Flora's collar.

How can a woman, somebody asks me, even of Mrs. Skewbald's *genre*, be made happy, by hearing of the daughter of her brother the most woeful things that can be said of a woman? In this way

my innocent friend, Mrs. Skewbald, albeit unused to the melting mood, was discovered one day weeping bitterly by her husband;—no small shock, as may be fancied, to one of his sensitive temperament. He had noticed a few days before, that she was grievously neglecting her household duties—a sure sign of mental perturbation, for she was generally most attentive. Thus, he had to go and see the fowls fed, to weigh the grain for the horses, to number and write the date upon the eggs, in fact, to do the main part of her duty for several successive mornings. Finding her in tears, as I have said, to express sympathy and give consolation became his duty as a man and a husband. He proceeded to offer both.

“Hallo, what’s the row? you’re not crying? any one dead?”

“Oh, Skewbald!” was the only acknowledgment his soothing speech received, the afflicted lady at the same time sobbing with extra violence (she always called her husband by his surname, for she was a practical woman).

“If it’s anybody I know, can’t you tell me, and

have done with it?" urged the major, on the supposition that some relative of hers was "off the hooks," as he said to himself. "What's the use of going on in this way? everything in the house is going to the bad. I got only four eggs this morning, and three of the young ducks were eaten by the rats last night. 'Pon my word, I'm surprised at you."

This last appeal to her feelings had great effect. Mrs. Skewbald took her handkerchief from her face, and said anxiously,—

"Which ducks? the Muscovies or the Aylesburys?"

"How do I know? But what are you crying for? You ought to have more sense at this time of your life."

The major's imprudent reminder very nearly prevented Mrs. Skewbald from going to inquire after the ducklings. The handkerchief went up to her melting eyes again, when her husband said rather wrathfully,

"'Gad, if you won't tell me, I'm sure I don't care to know."

"Oh, such dreadful things I have heard," she said, "about Flora."

"What about her?" he replied, turning on his heel to go.

Mrs. Skewbald communicated some of the choicest extracts from her Paharnauth letters.

"Have you nothing better to cry about but trash of the sort? You are long enough in India to know better. Well, well! you need not look astonished at me: it may be all Gospel truth for what I care. Are you going to see the cow milked or must I? she is standing at the verandah for the last half hour. You must let everything go to the devil, because that girl is making a fool of herself; good notion that!"

Mrs. Skewbald looked astonished at the major; she would much rather have her niece proved guilty than acknowledge that she herself was deceived by her informants. This is but natural: then the major's insinuation of her experience of cases of this sort, surprised her too.

She went off to see to the milk interests, sighing dolefully, believing that she was profoundly grieved

for Flora, and filled, as she thought, with sentiments, of the highest order of compassion for the Armits. "Ten hours gone before she was discovered to have eloped; brought back at night by the police, on a Sowar's horse," said Mrs. Skewbald to herself, repeating what she last heard of Flora: "as if there could be any mistake about that! Skewbald is becoming quite unbearable. I always thought her a designing girl."

Mrs. Skewbald, in her superior virtue, was quite pleased to have Flora's wickedness to bewail, the only drawback being the want of union on this point between the major and herself; he had no regard for *her* feelings, as one closely related to the sinner. The major's wife's was a quiet happiness; but Mrs. Kookrie's was exultant.

"Now, perhaps, Mrs. Ochter will give me credit for wishing to serve her when I wrote at first to warn her against this girl. Now I hope she is satisfied. What does Jane Lupton say? They went alone to a small bungalow at Pine Side, and would not come back until her mother-in-law came herself and took the young lady away.

I hope Mrs. Ochter now at least will make an apology for her treatment of me."

Mrs. Kookrie in her triumph perhaps forgot how strenuously she laboured to get into the graces of the young couple when they came to Chillumpore after their bridal tour; but that had nothing to do with the opinion she had formed in the first instance of Flora's character. These two ladies then knew quite well why Lony Ochter wanted to get leave to Paharnauth so badly, notwithstanding Mr. Skewbald's declaration to the contrary. It was of course to take his wife out of the hands of the destroyer of his happiness.

They were rather taken aback at Flora's sudden arrival, and they could only set down her unremitting attention to her husband, as a piece of intense hypocrisy. Mrs. Skewbald was not on good terms with Mrs. Kookrie, and consequently each thought that she alone knew of Flora's fall. The former, as a relative, came very much to the assistant-magistrate's house, and had to hear constant lamentations from Mrs. Armit over the alteration which had occurred in Flora. How superior Mrs. Skew-

bald's knowledge of the cause of this made her feel, to poor simple Mrs. Armit!

"Of course," thought that far-seeing lady, "she is separated from Captain Stapleton, and that is quite enough to account for her depression;" but in her conversation with Flora's mother it was nothing but—"the darling girl will soon get over it: her nerves have had such a shock: she was so devotedly attached to her husband," &c.

Mrs. Armit asked Dr. Huddee for an opinion about Flora's state; he answered her in the mysterious language of his craft; that is to say, he told her in very puzzling words, that he knew nothing about it; but the wretched Huddee was to blame really. The day after Flora came, he decided that he had better put the open anonymous letter and the three closed ones, into Lony Ochter's desk, with all his other correspondence. Supposing the latter to recover, he would certainly remember at some time, though not at once, everything that occurred to him before his stroke; and amongst the rest, his having read and received this horrible letter.

"If it were not forthcoming, he would conclude

that it had got into strange hands; and being so gross a production, Lony Ochter would naturally dislike it to be known that anyone had been wicked enough to write such atrocious things of his wife. It never occurred to the doctor to think that Lony Ochter could have for a moment believed in the truth of the letter he found in his patient's unconscious grasp. Strictly speaking, he, Huddee, had no right whatever to interfere in the matter; he had no right to read the letter under any circumstances; what had he to do with a patient's letter?"

He therefore determined not as yet to destroy the whole as he proposed at first, and quietly put them back. He felt uncomfortable about the business; and it only remained to him not to allow his patient to get at his correspondence, until he had quite recovered; this, with Flora's assistance, he expected to be able to do.

The young wife, soon after she got back to Chillumpore, heard from her considerate aunt Mrs. Skewbald, who received her with open arms, and from Mrs. Kookrie, who was overflowing with condolence—trying as it was to their chaste feelings

to avoid pointing the finger of virtuous scorn at her—very high-coloured accounts of her husband's unhappiness and changed demeanour, long before his illness.

The ladies were utterly confounded at Flora's cool reception of their statements, every word of which they felt should have wrung her guilty soul, if she were not "case-hardened" in her sin.

Flora, having little faith in either informant, very naturally refused to believe what they said. Her husband would have alluded in his letters to his troubles surely, if they were at all pressing, as the pair of gossips represented. Her scepticism was shaken by the garrulous old servant, who could not refrain from alluding to the same period; but he, with more consideration for his mistress's feelings than her lady friends displayed, suppressed much that might distress her. Her husband and she had never any secrets, at least he had none which she did not share; there was no harm, then, in her looking into his desk; she might discover some clue to his anxieties there. At that time her spirits were recovering the first shock they had received; the misery which oppressed

her on the night of her arrival was caused by her own consciousness of her shortcomings as a wife, heightened by the danger her husband was in, and the agony of suspense she had undergone during the journey.

His promised recovery, and the aid her return had given towards it, should have restored her cheerfulness rapidly. Hoping to find that his debts—for there could have been nothing else, she thought, to affect him,—even not so heavy or pressing as to distress him so much as was represented, she opened the desk, and the first thing that met her eyes was the anonymous letter, lying near the top, with the three sealed ones close by. The peculiarity of the writing attracted her attention; she read it bravely through, looked for the postmark, the letter having no date, and fancied that it had reached Chillumpore the very morning of her husband's attack. Here were three others which had arrived since then. How many may have come to him before? Heaven only knew how many. She could find no more in the desk; he had probably torn them up; she had seen enough to prove the truth of Mrs. Skewbald's

assertions ; she turned the key in the lock of the desk as she had found it, and went back to her own room to think. Could her husband have believed, upon such information, that his wife was a false and fallen woman ? was it possible that a tissue of falsehood like this, was the explanation of the mental distress which everybody talked about—the mental distress which even the doctor said was the chief cause of the disease which had all but killed him ?

Her first feeling was one of positive indignation at his weakness—at his allowing himself to be led away by the foulest accusations, which no woman is safe from, when the very way they were made should have convinced him of their falsity. Impossible that he could have had so little respect for her as to regard them !

“How am I to clear myself now ?” she exclaimed, wildly ; “how can I venture near him until he recovers and acknowledges how he has wronged me ?”

Her husband looked fondly on her now ; but did not the doctor say that he was like a child in his present state, and that he would not remember for

some time what had occurred immediately before his illness?

When these her first feelings at her discovery subsided, her own accusations of herself—such as we saw her giving way to on the night of her first love-vigil—darkened her mind doubly. Trivial, indeed, they were, compared with what she found in the open letter: but they were quite enough to deprive her of that power of enduring the worst, which only a consciousness of entire innocence could have given her. Having much to condemn herself for, she could not go boldly into her husband's presence, in defiance of the scandalous statements he permitted himself to believe about her, and, when the time came for doing so, prove to him proudly how he had wronged her. Her conscience told her that this satisfaction could never be hers; the punishment she had now to bear far exceeded her sin: but the knowledge of this brought her no consolation.

My readers will now, perhaps, understand the cause of that strange behaviour of the unhappy Flora's, which so alarmed her mother. Mrs. Armit now wished that the intelligence of her husband's illness

had been withheld from her daughter. She persuaded herself that the shock was too great for Flora to bear; and it was no blameable selfishness on her part, to think of Flora first before all others.

Mrs. Armit summoned the colonel from Nakpore; his presence might work some change for the better. But no! Flora's burden was not to be lightened by the affection and sympathy her parents lavished upon her.

The good colonel was shocked beyond expression; he used every entreaty and argument he could think of, to induce his darling to shake off the terrible gloom; but it was of no avail. She was not permitted to watch by her husband any longer at night. She shut herself up during the day without being able to give any reason. At last she adopted the only miserable expedient left; she took to her bed, pleading bodily illness: she lay silent and moody, readily taking the medicines prescribed for her by the doctor, and begged only to be left alone.

In the meanwhile Lony Ochter's convalescence sped on; he had to be told at last, to pacify him, that Flora was very ill; and that it was on this

account she did not tend him. He in his turn became uneasy for her; his recovery was delayed by it, and so the household was indeed dismal. Finally, Colonel and Mrs. Armit resolved to take Flora back to their own home, to see what change of scene and the revival of early associations might effect. She did not make so much opposition as they expected to their plan. The doctor warmly advocated it. Lony Ochter was so far recovered that he might be safely entrusted to his sister Louisa's guardianship. It took a long time to persuade him to consent to the arrangement, but he did so at last very unwillingly. It was carried out immediately; one night when he was almost asleep, somebody crept into his room very gently, kissed his forehead, and stole out again, and the next day he was told that his wife was gone. With the querulousness of an invalid, he was about to remark on the strangeness of her leaving him without a word of farewell; when his memory suddenly awoke, and every circumstance immediately antecedent to his becoming unconscious flashed across it with terrible distinctness. Weak though he still

was, his brain was much clearer, his reasoning powers much stronger, than they were for many weeks before his sunstroke. He remembered that he received an anonymous letter, and he remembered that he believed it to be true, though now he almost loathed himself, when he thought that accusations so scandalously false had for an instant affected him. Was it on account of this that Flora had fallen ill and left him with her father and mother? In his illness he must have raved about it, and he possibly may have in his delirium reproached and reviled her aloud. She had no other resource, then, but to go away from him. Ideas like these could not circle through poor Lony Ochter's brain, without producing much agitation, which he in vain endeavoured to hide from the doctor. His patient had formed a plan of going himself to Nakpore as soon as possible; he asked when he could venture to go? Huddee could not tell him plainly that his moving for any time was impossible, and that when it could be attempted, it could only be in the Paharnauth direction; he therefore tried to delude him with vague promises, which Lony Ochter was sharp

enough to see through. Nothing remained for the latter, then, but to simulate in turn. He pretended to feel quite well, to have a great appetite, to find lying in bed any longer most irksome. After a few days of this, he got leave to sit up in his bedroom: he knew that it was hopeless to ask for pen or paper, but one day it occurred to him as he sat, apparently listening to Louisa, who was reading aloud, that he might through her write to his wife. He had for some days heard nothing from her beyond his sister's telling him that she had heard from Mrs. Armit of Flora's safe arrival at Nakpore, and that she was somewhat better. He felt sick at heart when he reflected how harshly he was being treated. No one took the trouble to write regularly about Flora. They told him above all things he must keep his mind at rest: yet how could he be anything but constantly uneasy, especially when he considered more closely the circumstances of Flora's going? He could not feel certain that his fears were just as to the reasons of her going, unless he could communicate with her.

Next day, when Huddee came early, and mentioned that a distant call would prevent his looking in again until late in the evening, poor Lony Ochter told Louisa that she must act as his secretary, and write at his dictation to Flora. Louisa had received very strict instructions on this matter from the doctor, but he had said nothing against her writing as her brother asked her to do. She got a little table by her bed-side at which she intended to write. She would find everything in his desk, he said, so she brought it in. The ink, however, required to be replenished, and she left the room to look for a supply. He looked into the desk eagerly when her back was turned. Here were all his letters accumulated; he recognized the anonymous one at once, and four others in the same peculiar writing. He did not dare to think by whom the open letter may have been read—he had time to secure it with the other four, and to close the desk before his sister returned. He thought little of the heap of other letters, though he knew at a glance the hand-writing of his merciless creditors. He felt as if he did not care in the least for their worst efforts now. Why

Flora had left him, why, before going, she had avoided him so much, how he was to bring her back to her proper home? these were the matters which troubled him most now.

When Louisa came back, he felt a little too tired to dictate just then; he would sleep a little, and then perhaps he might manage it in the evening. Louisa, with great attention to the orders given her by the doctor, took away the desk again, and left Lony Ochter to himself,—all that he wanted. It will be noticed that he found one letter more than the number previously mentioned. He felt that he had nerve enough to read all: so he first opened the sealed ones (he remembered quite well what the open letter contained), and glancing through them, selected one which differed from the others in being dated. He was not a little astonished at finding himself adjured as follows:—

“If you have been weak enough to believe the contents of four letters written by the same hand as this, and addressed to you, try to believe this, the last, also. Every word they contained was false. I am not going to say why I wrote them, nor why I

write this. You will call me a coward, and a fool for my pains. I feel that I am both in writing again; yet I can't help it. I know that you will not give me credit for a wish to repair the mischief I may have done. I have reason to think that you were simple enough to fall sick from reading my first letter. Perhaps this will cure you again."

"Yes!" thought Lony Ochter, after making slow way through this strange communication, for it was written in a hurried, disjointed hand. "You are a coward and a fool, and a damned scoundrel into the bargain; but why you took the trouble to write this is more than I can understand:" for Lony Ochter at this time tried very hard to persuade himself that he never could have been led away by such wretched trickery, and that he was under a delusion now in fancying that he was. He could not, however, get over the remembrance of his driving to the magistrate's house to apply for leave. I need not copy the three remaining letters: they were very much the same as the first.

My readers may be unable, as well as Lony Ochter, to determine what object Lieutenant Budlee

could have had in writing the last of the series. It was obvious enough that he expected, when he wrote the first four, to create enough discord between Lony Ochter and Flora to render the latter unhappy, and so to punish her for the set she made against him on the night of the cavalry ball. It mattered little to him that the plan he adopted was one that few men are low enough in any rank of life to have recourse to; he knew that anonymous statements once read, rarely fail to produce some effect, be it ever so small, upon the mind of the reader. When Budlee heard of Lony Ochter's catastrophe, the news had an effect upon him such as I have already endeavoured to lay before my readers; he was driven nearly desperate, not by repentance or shame, but by fright, which latter quality has a good deal more to do with the conversion of the wicked than it is ever given credit for. The terror of possible investigation and discovery hung over him for some days, and he could think of no better plan for preventing both than the unhappy production just copied; he did not carry it out until tidings had been received at Paharnauth of Lony

Ochter's possible recovery. It had not reached Chillumpore until many days after Huddee replaced the first four which arrived in close succession to each other. It lay unnoticed, of course, amongst the invalid's other letters, until he got at his desk in the way related. Under the conviction that Flora read the open letter, or that her separation from him was in some way connected with it, Lony Ochter determined to send them all to her without delay. Louisa, when she returned, was greatly astonished, and vexed, at her carelessness, when he produced this packet, and asked her to seal carefully, and send it to Flora, with a little note he would now dictate. Like a sensible girl as she was, she at once decided that to refuse him would be but to add to the mischief, which the doctor said would ensue from his being allowed to think even of business matters; indeed Louisa thought, he looked rather better and brighter since the order had been infringed through her neglect, than before. She said nothing, but quietly sat down and prepared to write.

"Shall I write in your name or my own, dear?" she said.

"Will you allow me to write my name even?" he asked in return.

"How can you ask me such a thing, Harry? I know I am doing very wrong in writing even to your dictation. Where did the packet come from, sir? I insist upon knowing," Louisa answered, with mock severity, for she could not but observe that his spirits were much better than she had ever known them before.

"What's that to you, Loo? Some angel gave it to me."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Not a letter shall you make—not a single one. You could not even grasp a pen, you know."

"Couldn't I? Well, let me make a cross, at all events. Henry Lony Ochter his mark. That can't kill me."

"Not a scratch. What am I to write, dear? it is just post hour."

"Oh! say that I send her these letters—you needn't mention how I got at them—in the hope that they will make her laugh as much as they have made me, and that I want to know who wrote them;

and that if she does not come back sharp, I will order Huddee into jail, and go myself and fetch her. Seal them up carefully, Loo, and keep your note separate," he added, rather anxiously.

Louisa did as she was told, and mentioned in a postscript that Henry was ever so much better since he managed to get at his desk, where she supposed these letters were. He would be, she knew, a great deal happier if Flora could write a line in return.

The packet was duly despatched: he could think of no other way of relieving Flora, if the unhappy letter had anything to do with her illness; if it had not, but if, as he was convinced, she had read it, might she not feel grieved at his concealing it from her, though she could not complain? Situated as he was, he could say nothing seriously on the subject; and by getting Louisa to write jokingly, he must convince her, if that were needed, that the anonymous packet had no effect upon him. So our poor invalid reasoned.

Louisa did not venture to tell Huddee how sadly his instructions had been violated: and next day,

when that life-preserver inspected his patient, and pronounced him wonderfully improved—the effect, as he said, of a particular combination of medicines, devised by himself, and administered for the first time to his patient yesterday—she congratulated him upon his skill with great fervour.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEA EX MACHINA.

MR. MCCUDDUM felt himself again when, under a prolonged salute from files of clerks and examiners, and section-writers, white, black, and mixed, he entered the Mamjamma Board-room, and resumed office once more. The Secretary was, however, somewhat mortified to find that things had gone on a great deal more smoothly during his absence than he had anticipated; and if it were not for the immense respect in which he held Mr. Ussul, the president, he would have reproached that venerable gentleman for summoning him so urgently, when there was really very little reason for his doing so, that he could discover. But how was Mr. McCuddum to know that Mrs., not Mr., Ussul was the blameable party; that it was at her instigation the president had so earnestly entreated him to return; and that she

worked on her husband with the laudable motive of rescuing him from the Harpies of Paharnauth?

Mrs. Ussul was a philanthropic lady, who wore an auburn front, was close upon fifty years of age, and weighed very nearly half that number of stones; she took the greatest interest in Mr. McCuddum's welfare, and it pained her very much to hear that a designing young person in the Hills was making violent efforts to marry him, whether he chose or not. It cut Mrs. Ussul to the heart to hear from her friend, Mrs. Cham Bayley, of the danger Mr. McCuddum was in.

"I assure you," Mrs. C. B. wrote, "that nothing else is talked of here. This Miss Ochter's conduct is gross in the extreme, and her mother, whose match-making propensities are notorious, makes herself quite ridiculous by her open attentions to Mr. McCuddum. The girl is not at all suited to him, she is forward, far from being accomplished, and, I think, decidedly plain." (Mrs. C. B. had grown up daughters.) "It would be a thousand pities to see him thrown away upon such a person; independent of that, the connection is not desirable. Whenever

Mr. McCuddum is not at hand, she flirts quite shockingly with several gentlemen I could name, so much so that I have often regretted that I allowed my girls to make her acquaintance."

Mrs. Cham Bayley, who was a mirror of every Christian virtue, and who was always denouncing backbiting and detraction in particular, was a lady upon whose statements Mrs. Ussul could place most implicit reliance. It was no wonder, then, that she trembled for the happiness of Mr. McCuddum.

By the merest accident, shortly after he was appointed permanent secretary to the Momjamma Board, Mrs. Ussul invited a niece of hers, the daughter of a deceased major of the other presidency, then living with her widowed mother in England, to come all the way to Nuggudpore and keep her company. It appears a strange thing to invite a young lady to come such an immense journey for a visit; but all young ladies whose parents are not in the country, come out, we know, for no other purpose whatever: there is nothing uncommon about it. Lydia Jane Gidding's mamma accepted with much

gratitude Mrs. Ussul's invitation, and her daughter was duly despatched, and in good time received into the arms of her aunt.

Lydia Jane arrived at Nuggudpore, provokingly enough, just after Mr. McCuddum left. I write 'provokingly,' for I was of course in Mrs. Ussul's confidence, and I happened to know that she was vexed at it. When intelligence came from Paharnauth of Mr. McCuddum's matrimonial prospects, Miss Gidding found that Mrs. Ussul's manner towards her changed very much for the worse. Mrs. Ussul seemed to cease to take any interest in her niece; and talked, not at all vaguely, of Lydia's return to mamma in England.

Now poor Lydia fancied that she came to India on the understanding that she was to get shelter and protection from her aunt, until she could do as all other young ladies in similar circumstances manage to do sooner or later, and she naturally was horrified at this unkindness. One day, however, it happened to be the day on which the letter arrived announcing Mr. McCuddum's immediate return, Mrs. Ussul's manner towards her suddenly became most affection-

ate; she became quite motherly in her anxieties about her. She inspected her wardrobe, and gave immediate orders for supplying the very many deficiencies Lydia Gidding's scanty outfit exhibited. She gave Lydia small lectures on drawing-room proprieties, and went so far as to tell her to "hold herself up" twice during dinner.

Lydia's spirit rose accordingly, and the dreary prospect of a return to England faded away. Lydia Gidding's mother was a poor widow, not without sons and daughters, whose mouths her own pension along with theirs barely filled. Where poverty is, happiness cannot be, at least in the case of people with pretensions to gentility: so Lydia must not be blamed for never feeling so happy in her life as on the day she was "whipped" over the bulwarks of the good ship *Sheesh Mahal*, and separated, she did not care to think for how long, from her fretful mother and quarrelsome brothers and sisters.

Let philosophers argue as they may, they will never convince us that we can be happy when our means are entirely out of proportion to our wants. A rich man suddenly reduced to poverty

might be happy, if he could at the same time reduce his habits and desires to the standard of the pauper; but this is beyond his power, and nothing remains for him but to be miserable. A charwoman with one-eighth of Mrs. Gidding's pension, and twice as many children to support, would have been as happy as a queen, if such a thing as a happy queen can exist; but then the charwoman's idea of earthly felicity is tea without stint, ditto tobacco, and a black bottle in her cupboard. Mrs. Gidding had the misfortune to be an officer's widow, and it was therefore incumbent upon her to appear respectable at any sacrifice of comfort. When a rather well-known Roman said, that the worst part of poverty was its making people ridiculous, he must have had in his eye the shabby genteel shifts of his day, represented in ours by dyed ribbons, cleaned gloves, washed silks, and turned dresses. In order to keep up her position in society, Major Gidding's widow pinched and starved her children in scant but very expensive lodgings, in a highly respectable house, in a highly respectable street, in the fashionable end of a town, instead of taking a thatched cottage in the country, and

rearing fowls and fattening' pigs for the market. This she should have done; but she would rather have died, and all her children die, of bad air and unwholesome food, than do it; "keeping up appearances," is almost exclusively a feminine failing.

Her mother bestowed much sensible advice upon Lydia at parting, for she had great pride, poor woman, in her eldest daughter, and she did not disguise from her the hopes she had of her marrying well in India. Lydia accepted the greater part of the advice with certain concealed reservations. A strange, frightened, gawky girl she looked, on her first appearance on the poop of the *Sheesh Mahal*, after she, the ship, passed Madeira; and there was little alteration in her on the day she sat in full fig in Mrs. Ussul's drawing-room, when Mr. McCuddum was expected. Mrs. Ussul had not allowed a word to pass her lips, which could lead Lydia to account for the sudden change in her aunt's manner towards her, and Lydia, like a sensible girl, did not trouble herself with conjecturing. A woman's faith in clothing is nearly as strong as her faith in her face, and she would be nearly as much outraged by your

telling her that she did not dress becomingly, as by your telling her that her mouth or eyes were not to your taste. To Lydia Gidding, who all her life before had been compelled to wear cheap muslins, chip bonnets, and inferior merinos of her own, or furbished up old finery of her mother's, *carte blanche* even at a Parsee milliner's was no small boon.

The delicacy of this chronicle shall not be outraged by my hinting, in the gentlest terms possible, that her appearance would have been greatly improved by an article of dress not known in her day, and which flourished but for a limited period in ours,—the object of which was to give a graceful expansion backwards to the figure; which article, though now despised and almost forgotten, was nevertheless the archetype of that magnificent apparatus by which the figure is now expanded in all directions, and aided by which, the leanest maiden of fifty can compete, as far as form goes, with one thirty-two years younger, whose “lines” equal those of the Medici Venus.

When you looked into her face, you saw three great characteristics: first, her eyes were large,

consisting almost entirely of white, and were very prominent; second, her mouth and lips were large; third, her nose was large and red at the end; forehead low, face narrow, cheeks hollow. Altogether she was as plain a young person as a sensible man could wish for. Although she believed herself endowed as to face, figure, manners, and accomplishments, with fascinating powers of the highest order, her position was too unsatisfactory to allow of her being fastidious. A house of her own, however humble, a regular supply of money, however small its quantity, a freedom from the state of dependence in which she now lived, comprised all she hoped to gain from matrimony, and the sooner she gained them the better. Without a grain of sentiment or romance in her ideas, she longed not for a lover, but a husband; at the same time she never thought of determining whether she would prefer him old or young, handsome or ugly, civil or military, rich or poor.

Mr. McCuddum arrived and was welcomed by the Ussuls on the day he was expected. Mrs. Ussul did not, possibly, know how deeply he had committed himself in the matter of the designing young person

in the Hills, or his reception might not have been quite so warm. It is but just to Mr. McCuddum to state that his ardour began to cool very rapidly from the day of his leaving Paharnauth. He considered himself ill-used, and his dignity compromised by the Beauclerc Cottage people. He had waited many days after the time fixed for an answer to his proposals; he had made every allowance for the affliction into which the young lady was plunged; but it would appear that the feelings and the interest of the Secretary to Momjamma Board were completely disregarded because such an inferior animal as a junior assistant magistrate happened to be ill. This was more than Mr. McCuddum could bear; he was bound to maintain the dignity of his office in his private as well as his public capacity, and a slur had been cast upon it. He could not expect that the young lady, whom he had hastily selected, would assist him in maintaining his high position afterwards, if she commenced so very inauspiciously. With such reflections as these acting upon him, it is not to be wondered that Mr. McCuddum cooled down as rapidly as he had first boiled

up ; and before his journey was over he resolved that if he found no intelligence from the Larch Runs awaiting him at Nuggudpore, he would write to the Russuds and request them to signify to Mrs. Ochter, politely but firmly, that he wished his proposal for Miss Ochter's hand to be considered withdrawn. Mr. McCuddum was not one of those lovers whose flame is increased by separation. Scarcely a spark of his old love remained when he was introduced, alas for Esther's fortunes ! to " My niece, Miss Gidding."

He felt at first that he would have been happier in the Ussuls' house without Miss Gidding, for his old bashfulness revived at the sight of a maiden ; then again he thought there could be no better remedy for this weakness of his than constant association with a young female, and under the same roof. His kind friend, Mrs. Ussul, expected much more important results from their constant intercourse. Before he went to office in the morning, Mr. McCuddum had an early drive with Mrs. Ussul and Miss Gidding. His evenings were spent in the same company, though he often found himself practically alone with the young lady, for the old people went

to sleep long before they went to bed. Miss Gidding made tea for him ; she played and sang for his benefit, and produced a wonderful effect upon him thereby : for the Secretary could not distinguish between Yankee Doodle and the Hallelujah Chorus. Thus poor Lydia's screaming and thumping made to him a "concord of sweet sounds" quite as thrilling as the best London morning concert performer could evoke. After a short time they conversed much. It must have been pleasing to Mr. McCuddum to contrast the cold, constrained answers he always got from Esther, with the reverential attention with which every word he dropped was received by Lydia. Every sentence she uttered in reply proved plainly, that she believed herself in the presence of some superior being ; how different from Miss Ochter, who spoke to him as if they were on a perfect equality ! Yet Lydia was a niece of the president of the Momjamma Board, while Miss Ochter was only the daughter of a colonel. Humility in a young and gentle girl is so much more commendable than pride. Mr. McCuddum concluded that Miss Ochter's vanity was a great defect he had almost overlooked ; ought

he not rather to have congratulated himself that things had turned out as they had, for he found no letter from Mr. Russud at Nuggudpore, and he at once wrote, as he resolved on his journey, to request him to withdraw his proposal.

It is generally understood that the consciousness of having been rejected makes a man feel rather uncomfortable, if not humbled; it is supposed to be a somewhat painful ordeal to go through. To be rejected by a girl because she does not think you worth having, or because she likes somebody else better, is considered to be at least disagreeable: you are expected to tear your hair, to feel suicidal, to decline to be consoled, to make a vow of eternal hatred of the sex, to take to drink, to propose to some other girl immediately, or, in fine, to make some demonstration of anguish for the edification of your friends. It is decidedly not lawful to wash your hands and eat your dinner as if nothing had happened. Nothing of this sort occurred to Mr. McCuddum, for the simple reason that he never supposed himself rejected. He had merely thrown his handkerchief; before it could be seized, he had

taken it up again and put it in his pocket,—that was all. He pleased himself with the picture of the consternation his message would cause in the Beauclerc household: he was prepared to receive a most humble representation from Mrs. Ochter, praying him to repent; and he had a majestic reply ready drawn up, in which he declined absolutely to reconsider the subject. Notwithstanding the sternness with which he felt himself compelled to act in Mrs. Ochter's case, the arguments by which he had before convinced himself that he ought to enter into the married state, remained in full force. Personal beauty, though desirable in a wife, should not, in the estimation of a man of intellect, outweigh moral qualifications: he had every opportunity of investigating those of Lydia Gidding. She was gentle, unaffected (so much so that she could not conceal her admiration for his talent), and free from pride; she had never been surrounded by a flock of admirers whose flatteries and compliments could not but influence perniciously the most high-minded woman. She was anxious to please, and she was accomplished; at least her musical performances

proved her to be so to Mr. McCuddum : and, besides, he found a marker of hers in a stray volume of Madame De Staël's works untranslated, which happened to be in the house. How the marker came there it would be difficult to say, for Lydia, though she had had French lessons at one-and-sixpence each from a Red Republican who skulked in London as an emigrant marquis, could not read even a line of Telemachus. Then she was a good connection ; for the Ussul name was high in the land, and not to be despised by a man even of the secretary's talents. When Mr. McCuddum had arrived at this stage in his ratiocination, Mrs. Ussul, who observed the working of the spell quietly, felt very sanguine as to the result ; and Lydia, who a few months before often nearly cried through cold and hunger in her mother's economic two pair back, almost sank under the intensity of her joyous emotions when unequivocal appearances of Mr. McCuddum's regard were displayed.

CHAPTER IX.

CLEARING OFF.

SOME three months after the night on which Flora suddenly departed, a happy looking-party was assembled, for the first time, in the drawing-room of Beauclerc Cottage. The annual deluge was just over. The blue heaven and the distant mountain ridges, both long hidden, again became visible. The clouds, "the daughters of the earth and waters, and the nurslings of the sky," were weaned for the season. "The vapours ceased to weep their burden to the ground." Fogs and mists, dry and moist, moving and stationary, no longer prevented you from seeing a foot beyond your nose for weeks together. You might venture out of doors for an hour, and escape being overwhelmed by a Nimbus, or lost in a Cirro-stratus; you might open your window without feeling certain of finding a Cumulus

on your bed, or a large fragment of melting Stratus on your dressing-table. The roads, after officiating as water-courses for a long period, might again be travelled over, without any great risk of one's being made away with by a landslip, or swept over the khud by an extempore rush of water from the hill-side above him. The raw, damp, gloomy atmosphere had passed away, leaving behind, however, for a short time, the luxuriance of vegetation which it had fostered. Up to the margin of the grey granite tiers, where eternal sterility reigns, the mountains were covered with verdure; even the dusky masses of fir, by which the summits of the less lofty ranges were crested, lost some of their sombreness in the bright green which bordered them below. The ravine-sides were still scored, here and there, by the white foamed lines of the torrents racing down them. The black stems and branches of the oaks were still fringed by the lace-like fronds of countless varieties of fern, revelling in their brief epiphyte beauty, some curving gracefully down, hid the trunk from which they hung in a delicate tracery; while others more fragile but more aspiring, forced their way

upwards, and mingled their bright green festoons with the oak's pale leaflets. Among the mosses and the lichens, which carpeted every rock and every boulder, were still to be found the faintly tinted petals of many a rain-flower, mostly at the bottom of ravines, deep and dark, where sunbeam never found its way to give them scent or colour; in more genial places, a few brightly coloured ones were still in bloom. But to stop this "playing with flowers," and "babbling of green fields," like poor Sir John, when hurrying from Mr. Quickly's house at Eastcheap, to "Arthur's bosom," it was the commencement of the Himalaya autumn, a season much prized, because of the long term of clouds, and rain, and influenzas, and confinement within doors, which precedes it, but not nearly equal to the Himalaya spring, which few know anything about.

Lony Ochter and his wife had just arrived. He was still weak, but looking marvellously contented as he sat in a chair drawn to the window, with Flora standing beside him, and pointing out to him sundry houses visible therefrom, which contained inhabi-

tants worth talking about. She looked notwithstanding her troubles, as if no care had ever ruffled her brow, but any one who had known the couple shortly after they were married, would have noticed a marked change in their relations now. She had had a lesson, not the less bitter because nobody but herself knew the misery she had gone through in learning it. We have seen how, entirely overcome by her hysterical despondency, she was only too glad to fly with her parents from her husband's house. The probability that he had been insidiously led, before his illness, to suspect her of the worst unfaithfulness; the voice of her own conscience which loudly accused her of the comparatively trivial errors she had fallen into, magnifying them tenfold (it told her, that though she had done her husband no actual wrong, she dare not assume the garb of injured innocence and declare herself absolutely guiltless, for had she not deceived him from the first?) the impossibility of any explanation with him at that time; all this acting upon her nerves, already strained and exhausted by suspense and long watching, was more than enough to re-

duce her to the woful condition her father found her in.

On reaching their own home, Colonel and Mrs. Armit resolved that she should, for a short time at least, have her own way; they saw that any attempt to offer her consolation, or to cheer her up, only increased her distress and deepened the despairing expression her face was never free from. For some days after she got to Nakpore, there was not the slightest appearance of amendment; her spirits did not revive for a moment, as it was hoped they would when she was once more under her father's roof. Laid again in her own room, she turned her face to the wall and begged to be left alone. What could her broken-hearted parents think, but that an affliction, worse than death, was threatening the only child spared to their old age? Beyond anxious inquiries, often repeated, for her husband, she never opened her lips. Thus it was with Flora, when the packet, whose despatch we witnessed, was put into her hands. Not wishing to appear to watch her too closely, Mrs. Armit left the room, after giving it to her, with a murmured prayer

that it might bring comfort to one who needed it so sadly. She returned shortly after to find Flora struggling in a paroxysm of convulsions, mingled with laughter and weeping, and, at the same time, almost insensible. Mrs. Armit condemned herself for the imprudence of giving Flora the packet, without first ascertaining that its contents were not of a kind likely to disturb her, but, notwithstanding the severe fit of hysterics, she was happy to see her weep. She became conscious after a short time, the unearthly laughter ceased, her limbs which were convulsed at first, became still, she shed an abundant flood of tears, and at last slept tranquilly. Next day she began to speak and to smile, relief had come to her, and the heavy load was lifted off her parents' hearts. Mrs. Armit wrote the cheering tidings to Louisa, and Flora sent back the packet, unopened, to her husband; her mother wrote for her to Louisa.

“What can my dear Henry mean by sending me this mysterious parcel? I am not strong enough to write to him yet, but I hope to be with him in a few days; tell him he can't fancy how much good

it has done me to come here. When I get back, I shall enjoy reading these amusing letters, as he calls them, more than I could alone. I know that I cannot be made happy while away from him."

To read and fully comprehend the few words Lony Ochter had dictated to Louisa, for Flora's perusal, was, to the latter, as my readers may imagine, a draught of happiness she had not expected to taste. Under its influence, peace of mind and cheerfulness returned rapidly. She did not require to read the letters he had sent her to know that she had lost nothing in his estimation; besides, had she not read one already? whether he suspected that she had or not, it appeared to her to be the pleasantest arrangement to assume entire ignorance of the contents of the carefully sealed packet, and to return it as it came, at the same time, not permitting her husband to believe that her indisposition was due to any other cause than the natural anxiety and fatigue caused by his illness.

Her message to him, then, should only be enough to prove that she had left him unwillingly and would return gladly when her health permitted it.

All the rest must be buried deep in her soul for ever. This may not appear straightforward policy of Flora's, but it must be remembered that her moral principles were not very highly strung, and that in these modern days Magdalenic repentance is not much regarded. If she were to throw herself at her husband's feet, and say, "For a long time I have liked somebody else much better than you, dear; I am excessively sorry for it, and I will never do it again;" however firmly he might believe in her protestations of amendment, the confession could not but interfere with his peace of mind. The course she took was much more adapted to modern views, and quite as efficacious as Magdalenic repentance, she set her husband's mind at rest, and made a resolution, that, for evermore, while they were both on earth, he should be all in all to her. This resolution she kept; and considering that she was by no means a heroine of noble sentiments, of strong devotional qualities, of mighty virtues or vices, but a weak, vain, admiration-hunting, self-hugging, average style of woman, she deserves great credit for keeping it. We are not bound to examine too

closely the reasons of her making this resolution : whether from a grateful sense of peril escaped, or a newly-acquired idea of obligation to her husband, or because of the way she had been deceived, or because of her fear of the scandal-tongue of the civilized world, it would not be fair to inquire.

Lony Ochter was rather relieved than otherwise to find out that he was wrong in fearing that the open anonymous letter had been read by Flora. It was evident *to him* from her message, that she had no idea of the contents of the packet. Much pleased at this discovery, he destroyed the collection, with a few unavoidable imprecations directed to the unknown writer thereof. Some time after, when Flora one day asked him what the letters were, he answered,

“Oh, some peculiarly impudent duns; I tore them up, I think, before you came back.”

“And why did you ask me to let you know who wrote them?”

“Did I? I dare say I could not make out all the signatures,” he answered, rather uneasily, and the subject was never alluded to again.

As soon as Flora rejoined her husband, his

recovery progressed rapidly. His light-heartedness and joyous spirit returned, clouded only by money annoyances. Mr. Muggins's letters, which formed quite a heap by themselves, alarmed even Flora when she read them, though she had a contempt for pecuniary cares which her husband envied. The bank, according to Mr. Muggins, had shown him, Mr. Ochter, an amount of indulgence and consideration quite out of their rules. Law proceedings of the most decisive kind must be resorted to without delay, unless he immediately remitted a total of unpaid instalment and accumulated interests, which he could not raise by the sale of everything he possessed in the world. Mr. Muggins's latest letter granted him one week's indulgence. Flora said at once that she would ask her father for the money, not thinking what a surprise such a request would give him. Lony Ochter would not hear of it. Nothing remained but the native bankers, and a consequent addition to his present load of embarrassment entirely beyond his endurance. For all the joy he felt in Flora's love, for she now accorded him a very different measure

of that pleasant stimulant from any he had ever before received, he began to become depressed and anxious; his other creditors had seen in the Mofussil papers mention made of his dangerous illness, and spared him accordingly; but Mr. Muggins's position did not permit him to relax.

At length, however, unexpected relief came; first in the shape of a paragraph in a Calcutta paper, announcing the mysterious disappearance of the manager of the Meehurbanee Bank, and a few days later, in an exultant letter from one of Lony Ochter's contemporaries who had managed to hold on in Calcutta, from which I take the following extract,—

“Bolted, sir, four days ago—clean gone, after a run of swindling which no one can remember the like of. The heavier part of the loan business, with certain secret conditions which you and I know of, old fellow, was an invention of his own, which did not appear in the bank-book at all; he made use of the bank's name to fleece as many as he could, and by that dodge of his, kept the whole thing dark. People don't appear to know why he bolted; he went off quite suddenly, and they say,

that his own nest is not over feathered. Speculated, I suppose, heavily; the directors behave very decently. In his desk at the bank, parcels marked with a whole heap of fellows' names were found, yours and mine, among the rest. These they returned to each man unopened, requesting him to say nothing of the circumstance, for it isn't, you see, creditable to them that he could have gone on so long undetected. My first loan is written off the bank-books, and no second or third one is entered on them; so it is perfectly optional with me to pay up the first or not. I dare say you are exactly in the same boat; isn't it jolly? The bank will lose heavily, but all they seem to care about is secrecy. I am glad to see you are all right again. Knowing ones say that you fellows are sure of a "pot" at the Chandneypore. If I had the money, I should offer you 12,000 for your share in the 'osses, but you are too wide awake to sell now. I saw Polonaise at her gallop yesterday; if she don't astonish the country-breds it is a pity."

Lony Ochter could not but share in his corre-

spondent's jolliness ; what a load Mr. Muggins's flight relieved him of. He pronounced himself the luckiest devil on record ; his confederate correspondents wrote, too, most sanguinely about their Chandneypore prospects ; unless some extraordinary mischance occurred they must carry all before them. His share of their certain gains would more than clear off his debts. No wonder, then, that when Dr. Huddee reported him fit to move, he went off with his wife on sick leave to Paharnauth in great spirits.

Beaunclerc Cottage gave him, it need not be said, a warm welcome. His good mother forgot for the first time when he arrived, the blow she had received some weeks before from Mr. McCuddum's disgraceful behaviour to her daughter. The limits of my tale compel me to leave to the imagination of my readers the state of her feelings when it was communicated to her, that in plain English he had changed his mind. Poor Esther had a sad time of it. As soon as her son was pronounced out of danger, Mrs. Ochter's thoughts, of course, reverted to Mr. McCuddum's proposal. He, she learnt, had left Paharnauth, and had since then

“made no sign.” She very naturally concluded that his silence was owing to consideration for the sorrow the family was plunged in; but was it not now her or Esther’s duty, to open communications with him? Nothing, alas, was known at Beauclerc Cottage of the Syren at Nuggudpore!

Esther cannot allow that she possesses the minutest atom of respect or liking which would justify her in offering herself to this world-respected man. She tries, too, to shift the burden from her shoulders, by declaring that if he had any regard for her, he would not have taken flight from Paharnauth and made himself heard of no more. She was too timid to say boldly, “No, it can’t be done!” and thus save herself from entreaties, reproaches, and worse, never intermitting. Gertrude, laden with a secret of her own, every day becoming harder to bear, could give Esther much sympathy and but little help, beyond turning the violence of the hurricane upon herself occasionally, by disparaging, in assumed ignorance of what was pending, the man of the maternal choice.

Mrs. Ochter, feeling all the sharpness, worse

than serpent's tooth, of thankless children, declared that her well-dyed grey hairs would be rapidly brought in sorrow to the grave. Before, however, Esther's contumacy had brought her to this melancholy issue, Mrs. Ochter's grief was changed into indignation, and the heartless trifler with her daughter's affection could never again be named by her, except in scorn. Esther bore the revelation of his treachery with a resignation which aggravated her mother's sufferings, and when information came of the secretary's proceedings, she felt very much tempted to worship Lydia Gidding.

Very rarely, indeed, since we last encountered him, did Stapleton, bold captain of Buffadars, see his "Eidolon" in the flesh. His resolutions of keeping at a safe distance from the flame, Spartan moth that he was! had been aided by the Beauclerc Cottage grief, and by the weather. Three or four distant bows per month, appear very feeble conductors between eyes and hearts, even in the highest state of love electricity, yet they were quite enough to maintain his "Eidolon" in a very lively condition. The Gingalls were sick of their relative, if the truth must

be told. He had not even the grace to conceal from the young ladies of that family, his unpardonable indifference to their efforts to please, or, perhaps, poor things! to make their silly selves attractive to him. They were delighted at first, when, evening after evening, he exposed himself recklessly to the public eye, in company with the plainest and worst dressed girls in Paharnauth, and that was no small trial for him; because, though plain and ill-dressed girls are not, unfortunately, by any means rare in his hypercritical world, Paharnauth, by some inexplicable dispensation, gets off with a very small annual average. It really is no trifling matter to feel one's self under an obligation to be attentive to an "unidea'd," uneducated, silly, giggling, chattering, and of course vain, human being, whether ugly or handsome, because said being is, in the first place feminine, and in the second a cousin, or a friend's wife, commended to one's guardianship. Such beings are seldom encountered, but they nevertheless exist. The Gingall girls did not altogether belong to this painful class; but to a man whose heart was troubled as Stapleton's was, they were insupportable.

In his evening promenades with them he was so silent, so inattentive to any remark they made, so cheerless of manner, that the Gingalls very soon gave him up, and declined to go out any more under his escort. He didn't know why; he fancied that it was probable the parental Gingalls had heard of his money difficulties, and suspected him of an attempt to ravish the affections of one or other of their maidens. He lived for a long time very wretchedly, until a fortnight before the young couple from Chillumpore came up, when he was surprised by a letter from the adjutant, Kookrie, directing him to join without delay. The regiment had received orders to hold itself in readiness to march at a moment's warning.

There had been for some months before rumours of wars, a campaign was expected in the cold season, and the brave Buffadars were to do battle with the foe. A general exodus of the soldiering portion of the Paharnauth community took place. The Kilta Club and the Clive Arms became desolate; two months before the orthodox flitting time, jolly parties of heroes, ardent for the battle, were rushing

down to the plains for some days, leaving behind a fair proportion of bleeding hearts, and a large proportion of outlying bills. "Base is the slave that pays," but basest is he who does so with the possibility before him of not surviving to reap, in long terms of credit hereafter, the reward of his baseness. The prayers of Paynch, Tofa and Co., and of Sub-Cobri and Co., most obliging of Chapmen all, "for a small payment on account," could not be permitted to disturb souls bursting with zeal for the national glory (*ἰφθιμους ψυχὰς ἠρωων*); of warriors, who could think or talk of nothing but the movements of the enemy, and of the far-darting Sir Crom Aboo, whose shillelagh was to point the way to victory.

Our friends, Colonel Budlee and his brave son, were included amongst the down-goers. No one showed more eagerness for the fight than the former, who, like many another noisy swash buckler-felt, in his inmost soul, a prospective campaign a most infernal bore, though, in respect to the harness on his back, he snorted like a war-horse.

The deeds of the most courageous men are well

known. Courage is, to all appearance, the most decided characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon; yet I never knew or heard of a man having the courage to declare himself too old, too lazy, too corpulent and plethoric to fight, although that he is so is obvious to all men. Old Brevet Colonel Churbee, who has not crossed a horse or seen his toes for several lustrums, whose only employment is cramming capons, whose only happiness is eating them, who has no thought for anything this world can offer outside the circle of his stomach, will, when the war trumpet blares, endeavour to represent himself as ready to do battle as the fiercest of Lanzknechts; yet, poor old gentleman! when nobody is by, he shudders to think of the long marches, the hard fare, and the flying bullets before him. All thirst for honour and the doing of valorous deeds, after forty or more years of peaceable eating and drinking, is simply out of the question: nobody, however, doubts it, possibly because nobody arms *mourir pour la patrie* without feeling himself in some respect, be it ever so little, a sham. It will not be denied that the great majority of educated men, who fight for any other

reason than because they are ordered and paid for it, fight for themselves, not for *la patrie*; they fight for "honourable mentions," Crosses of Victoria, steps, brevets, &c.: that is, for their own glorification; if *la patrie* is benefited at the same time, *tant mieux*! But it should, at least, be understood, that when Captain, or Lieutenant, or even hairless-faced Ensign Maro talks of fighting for his country, he means fighting—for himself.

Budlee junior had never seen a shot fired, and he did not persuade himself, like other such juniors, that he was all anxiety to see and smell such shooting. He was in a pitiful plight on a long past raining night when we last caught a glimpse of him, and nothing of novelty has occurred to him since. He recovered his spirits in due time. One day, under the joint influence of terror and brandy, which latter had comforted him over-night, but left him depressed and unsober in the morning, the idea of staving off the discovery of his foul work by that last letter of his, which was about the worst remedy he could devise, crossed his alcohol-dimmed brain. He carried it out at once. When he saw clear

again, he felt, more certain than ever, that the thing must be traced to him now. However, weeks passed on, and nothing came of it. He gradually gained courage. Ochter must have destroyed the letters without paying the slightest attention to their contents; no harm had been done. When it was admissible to do so, he had called boldly at Beauclerc Cottage more than once, but no entrance found he. Mother and daughter were struggling over the McCuddum business; and neither had any desire to entertain such visitors as Lieutenant Budlee. It was all up with his chance, he was forced to own to himself, of winning the prize. He didn't acknowledge in his own mind, that he had not made sufficient impression by his person and manners upon Esther's heart; but he decided that, however willing the latter might prove, it was plain mother Ochter had found out his love secret, and she had resolved that it should never be told. This was much more flattering unction to lay to his soul than the thought that Esther herself would reject him. Stupid his life at Paharnauth became; the Kilta all but closed to him, this other just mentioned resource

cut off, he had nothing left him but to smoke cheroots from morning until night in the verandah of Vacluse, and quarrel with his father. A summons, then, to rejoin his regiment without delay ought to have been more agreeable to Atrides than to Atreus, for old Atreus enjoyed life pretty well; he wanted little but good dinners to eat, good wines of the Indian standard to drink, and plenty of cronies to talk to, and these moderate pleasures Paharnauth society provided, while a campaign (in the old style) promised the reverse. Atrides, it must be said, thought when he received the tidings more of a medical certificate of inability to leave the Hills than of getting down as soon as possible, as Atreus did and advised, infernal bore though it was.

Lieutenant Budlee had a philosophic contempt for *la gloire*, which contempt, however, he was too prudent not to conceal from the *profanum vulgus*, seeing that said *vulgus*, in its unreasoning blindness, was accustomed to give such philosophy a very harsh name. In addition, he had the unhappiness to know that his regiment, not oblivious of his skill at billiards and his luck at games of chance, would much prefer

to march to glory without him. "To make your regiment your home," is good advice, especially to young fellows destitute of Dowb qualifications, and unable, in consequence, to advance themselves out of it. But when your regiment declines to have itself made your home, and resolutely "Coventries" you, and further, if you insist on domestication, Parrys and Baumgartens you until you give in, the advice is not seasonable. Before Budlee junior got away on leave in April, being a far-seeing and discerning observer, he saw himself going full speed to "Coventry." How little he deserved being sent there, my readers may guess. He was a well-dressed young man, of correct morals and gentlemanly demeanour; he was attentive to duty, most respectful to all seniors, kind to juniors, constant at mess, and a liberal supporter of hounds, library, and like regimental institutions: yet, if he never put a *h* in the right place—if he chewed tobacco in the intervals of the courses at dinner—if he wore, in mufti, black velvet waistcoats and much jewellery—if the men of his company shouted "old Clo!" when he inspected their kits—if he got drunk in his quarters every night on gin and shrimps in most

improper society—if his father lived by bill discounting, and his mother was a Traviata—he could not have been more unmistakeably shown that he was not the man for the old —th.

My readers, not unacquainted *cum re militari*, do not require to be told, that whenever a regiment makes a dead set against one, it has in every case the amplest reason for so doing. No genuine martyr has turned up yet. The fastest, crackest regiment of blues or scarlets will not, as is the home newspaper notion, taboo a gentleman because he is poor, or tolerate a snob because he is rich. The man whose manners are not actually offensive, whose principles and practice are not dishonourable, whose disposition is not morosely unsocial, who has not proved himself a coward, has never yet had to complain of being persecuted.

An ingenuous English public lets loose a storm of indignation when, once in every four years or so, some hardened offender has the audacity to bring to light the several curious and summary processes by which he has been evicted from the Piebalds or the Duchess's Own. The public never stops to

think that, in the first place, the sufferer can be proved to have acted grossly in some one, if not in very many instances; in the second, that this gross conduct does not, as in civil life, stop at himself, but is a slur on every officer wearing the same badge and facings—no small consideration; and in the third place, that the regiment has no other so ready or certain means of redress.

Young Budlee, no doubt, thought himself a deeply injured individual. Not a word had ever been spoken in his presence of dislike or objection. He got on extremely well with the —th at first: no party of pleasure was made up without him; he shared a house with three of the most influential men in the regiment; he was welcome anywhere else. In a short time all was changed. Cold looks, short speeches, distant salutes, perpetual savage “wigs” on parade from the colonel—the adjutant of course following suit—exclusion from pool, and whist, and loo parties, at which he used to be the leader; his guests not over kindly received at mess; abandoned to live alone by his previous co-tenants; no one to associate with: what meant all this, young

Budlee? Whatever it meant (the last joined ensign could have told him, if pressed, in one word), it was enough to send him most gladly to Paharnauth on sick leave, and to make him most unwilling to rejoin. He delayed to the last moment, and then, no way of escape offering, and the official summons repeated, off he went at last.

Captain Stapleton, too, fixed the day for his departure. The wing of the Buffadars at Chillumpore was to march at once to join the head-quarters of the regiment; he was to command the light company in the coming business—a pleasant prospect for a man decidedly tinctured, as Stapleton was, with the true spirit of Bellona, a divine or demoniac essence, as the reader pleases. With so much life or death excitement and flurry before him, the Eidolon could not trouble him much—that was some comfort; nor could exasperated creditors, bill-realizing attorneys—very black sheep of “Themis in India,”—bully him when fighting for his country, his Honourable Company rather—that was another comfort. *Quien sabé?* Matchlock balls, fragments of brass shells, cuts of Trans-Khyber yataghans—genuine wave-lined steel

these—end one's joys and troubles occasionally, even when supported by light company of bravest Buffadars. Duns and bum-bailiffs can't chase a man across the Cocytus: they would be sold horribly! And no one that he (Stapleton) knows of would be particularly grieved if he were to form an item of the heap of brave fellows whose souls and bodies must part in the coming tussle: bodies, as he knew, not to be hidden away altogether, in a large hole, scooped out of the sandy soil, on a drizzly Sabbath evening some weeks hence, parson reading regulation "Man that is born of woman" once for all, and grizzled Sir Crom Aboo, winner of dear-bought victories, standing by leaning on sorrowful shillelagh. No man can contemplate the possibility of his becoming at no distant date one of the billets which every bullet, of Paynim or Christian facture, must have, without indulging in a little anticipatory lugubration; just as well he does, perhaps, seeing that he may go to earth otherwise unmourned.

So Stapleton was indulging himself with a melancholy last look at the hill-sides of Paharnauth, yellow in the setting sun, the evening before his departure.

Wishing to have a farewell peep at the exquisite view of the snow peak, best attainable in the vicinity of Beaclerc Cottage, having possibly, also, a wild hope of another vision, he walked in that direction, and did meet, by very extraordinary chance (seeing that it was eventime when people were wont to move out), Mrs. Ochter, jompan-borne, looking florid and fiery, result of much recent food and drink, and of crossed temper; Gertrude close behind, attended, as she was much of late, to the surprise and indignation of cotilloned Paharnauth, unable to discover what he could see to admire in such freckled pertness, by the Rev. Anselm Gregorian, shepherd of souls (shepherdess all but chosen); and last of all Esther, attended by nobody. Her golden tresses shone under her dark riding-hat, but the Madonna head drooped, and her face was white and sad. No wonder, seeing that the marriage question happily settled by Lydia—*Dea ex Machinâ*—had produced a sad disagreement with mamma, and that mamma had not let the matter rest even when the fish, with the precious ring in his stomach, was slipped off her hook, and now nearly fast on Mrs. Ussul's. This was silly on mamma's

part, but then she had much vexation and grief during the season now coming to a close, and had achieved nothing. Gertrude and the Padre probably meant something, but were not the two eldest still on the market? It was very hard for the poor lady to bear. The moment she recognized Stapleton, she snapped at him.

"Not gone yet, Captain Stapleton! you must be the last soldier left here," giving him an unwilling hand; for of late she felt an unaccountable antipathy to young military men with good faces, bad prospects and empty pockets, or stuffed with bills if anything; and Stapleton was a good example of this numerous class. Stapleton saluted the lady most respectfully.

"I am nearly the last of the Mohicans," he replied, "certainly; I go to-night, or rather to-morrow morning. Any commissions for Chillumpore?"

"Oh, no! Henry and his wife will have left probably before you get there. They are coming here for a short time."

"I didn't know," he answered. "He is quite himself again, I hope. I will meet them very likely

on the road. But I must not detain you. Good-bye."

Unwilling hand again given and the matron prepared to move on, and to forget the existence of this Native Infantry captain in all future time.

"Good-bye, Captain Stapleton," said Gertrude, warmly.

Her pony, during the foregoing colloquy, had been investigating the flowers of the corner of mamma's shawl, which hung loosely over the back of the maternal vehicle. She wished to say something kind to neutralize the bitterness of her mother's cold parting with so intimate a friend, but he looked so pained that she thought it kinder to allow him to get away. Mr. Gregorian gave him a hearty farewell; and so passing on, our Mohican, at the present moment far from being cool, got to the rear of the party, which was brought up, as I have mentioned, by Esther.

Her pony, perhaps from restlessness, had turned round, and consequently its rider was looking away from the rest. Her face, when he looked into it, had a strange crimson glow on it; her mouth was slightly

compressed, and the dropped eyelids were quivering ; there was so much apparent agitation that it was as well the pony had turned. He tried to say "Farewell," but it was almost too much for him. She could say nothing, but held out a little white, rosy-palmed hand to be pressed, perchance desirous to press softly in return. The glove of this naked little hand hung by its finger-ends, mid reins and whip, loosely in the other. She glanced at him for a moment, and just as rosy-palm was being released—eyes may have spoken, tongues did not—by some inexplicable legerdemain, his hand wandered to the small empty glove, which somehow understood what was meant, and dropped into it.

All this was over in a very few seconds. Esther's pony heard Gertrude's moving on, and thought he might as well go on too, so he turned round and they were parted ; Esther, it may be imagined, angry with herself—I do not say that she was, for she was a true-hearted maiden ; Stapleton, deliriously happy, fondling the little warm glove, to be presently transferred to the breast-pocket of his shell-jacket, and to be there found dyed with another colour in due time.

And thus he sped to the wars, oblivious of debts, difficulties, and obstacles not to be got over—oblivious of everything but this tiny fragment of *hadina pellicula* secreted gage, and his good sword. The latter, it is true, but the regulation spit of Infantry, stamped with name of a tailor, and otherwise unpractical, yet long ago proved capable of much, in hands cunning and courageous.

When Lony Ochter and his wife arrived, Pahar-nauth was empty of fighting men. He did not find the place lonely or stupid in consequence. Riding in chase of health with his wife and sisters about the breezy hills, he soon caught it, and his jolly spirit banished all contention from Beaclerc Cottage. Esther regained her happy looks, and Mrs. Ochter ceased to fret over the splendid chances thrown away, so that when a particular account of Mr. McCuddum's marriage, and of the appearance and bearing of the bride, was read aloud one evening early in November to a fireside circle, she laughed almost as merrily as the youngsters.

When the lower hills began to whiten with morning frost, and evenings grew short, it was time for Lony

Ochter and Flora to go back to duty, debts troubling him no more, for the Chandneypore confederacy had fulfilled all their expectations at the famous meeting. He sold his share of the stud to great advantage. This, with his winnings, enabled him to act honourably towards the Meehurbanee Bank, and to silence his creditors. Mr. Ullney had been removed to another station, and "a regular brick" substituted, under whom Lony Ochter worked, with great benefit to himself and with great advantage to the State, henceforward.

CHAPTER X.

THAUMATURG.

IN the Himalaya mid-winter, when the roof, from chimney to eaves, of Beauclerc Cottage was hidden in a mantle of "innocent snow," fringed with sparkling ice-tags; when the garden, with its silent fountain, now looking like an infant's monument in frostwork, was a sheet of dead white, in which only terrier Jock, not unmindful of home amusements, rollicked when he got the chance; when even the rows of plants on the verandah were crusted, stems, branches, and leaves, with snow-crystals, from under which, however, red, blue, and purple petals peeped boldly here and there; when the lower hills were become temporary snowy ranges, and their black pine and fir crests powdered white; when the rhododendrons and the oaks were changed into frosted skeletons of trees, and the rills, dwindled remnants

of the brawling torrents of the rain-time, glistened silent and frost-bound in their pebbly beds; when it was strange to look down from this height of northern winter upon the emerald valley below, in which the very shapes of tropical plants could be distinguished in their never-fading summer richness—plants which must perish if a single snow-flake touched them; when the roads were impassable to all but the tinkling post-runners; when a few permanent residents of Parharnauth dozed the cold season through, in rather stupid but snug hybernation, isolated from and careless of each other, a very alarming incident occurred in the most comfortable sitting-room in Beauclerc Cottage.

It was a troubled season in the plains—the season of the first Sub-Loll campaign—when battles were done with unprecedented carnage, and glorious victories—the latter, alas! not unstained with alarms and panics and retreats—the memory of which, even to this day, is sore to many a valorous *Reiter*. My readers and I have fortunately little or nought to do with it; we are only concerned with a captain of light company who has gone to the fight in a

“forlorn-hope”ful and “do-or-die” spirit, with a *gant-gage* in the pocket of his shell-jacket.

Such details of the Sub-Loll fights as the newspapers furnished were read with interest by Mrs. Ochter and two of her daughters, and probably with something more than interest by the third—else why did she submit to have her glove ravished from her by one of the warriors? Engagement after engagement was described; his regiment took part in them, but his name was not mentioned, nor did it appear in the long list of “dead, wounded, and missing;” so that she at last was able to listen with tolerable impassiveness to Louisa or Gertrude reading, as the little party sat round the crackling fire, of the deeds that were done.

One day, however, the news of another great battle came, and when the reading commenced Esther took the usual precaution, poor girl! of sitting well back outside the others, on pretence of fire-glow making her face uncomfortable. The general’s despatch was read first, unintelligible, like all despatches, particularly to female comprehension. (Let me make solitary exception in favour of one despatch, famous

in and out of India, written, if common report does not lie for once, in great part by a woman.) Then Louisa, reader for the day, began the letters of the special correspondents from the seat of war, who wrote in those days, long before the great *London Versicolor*—mightiest newspaper!—thought of chartering its special scribe, whose functions this scribe, ill-supplied with patience, must avoid discussing.

“Oh! this is about somebody we know,” said Louisa; “Captain Stapleton, mamma,—you remember him?”

“Yes, my dear,” mamma answered, while Gertrude interjected,—

“Do read on, Loo; you always read anything interesting first to yourself.”

Esther sat silent and unobserved, with her hands clasped on her lap, a terror stealing over her pale face, and heart beating wildly, while Louisa read,—

“The pluckiest thing in the whole business was Stapleton’s, of the Buffadars. Three of the enemy went together at the poor old colonel of the regiment, and down he went, of course, his horse bolting.

Stapleton came up and fought them off, getting desperately cut up, as you may fancy. The enemy was in retreat at the time, and the three sowars had to leave him unfinished. Stapleton picked up his colonel, who was lying senseless, and staggered back to our lines with his burden. Just when he reached help, poor Stapleton dropped, and died, I am sorry to say, shortly afterwards."

"What a pity! poor young man!" said the matron. "How shocking! I am so sorry!—Esther!"

Esther screamed. Gertrude, who, when she was beginning to speak, looked round towards her sister, saw that she had fallen back, with the colour of death upon her face, swooning silently under the pressure of this terrible news, unseen at first by all except Jock, who, with fore-paws on sofa, Gertrude noticed, was looking wistfully, uttering a low whine, into her sister's face. Mother and daughters in consternation set about restoring her to life. This they easily did, and then she was borne away to her bedroom with a dim consciousness of a heart-breaking grief having come to darken her life for ever.

It was, indeed, a bitter discovery for Mrs. Ochter to make, that her darling's heart had been stolen, unknown to her, by a worse than penniless Native Infantry captain. To this all her cares and anxieties for her beautiful Esther had come then ! My readers may blame her or not, as they feel disposed ; but they must be told, as she sat long alone pondering over this new coil, that she never bestowed a thought on the heroism and valour of the dead soldier, but many a one on his treachery, as she considered it, and on her own want of vigilance. However, she had some consolation in hoping that Esther would recover the shock in time, and she did not attempt to disguise from herself a feeling of thankfulness that he was hurried out of the world to trouble her and hers no longer. What was Esther's sufferings now compared to what she would have had to endure if he had lived to wed her ? Some such reflections as these did this world-wise, prudent mother indulge in.

I cannot linger now to consider how much more creditable they were to female head and heart than the night-long sighs and tears of the poor deluded girl over-head. Can it be possible that the time

will ever come when this Esther will herself be a prudent, romanceless, love-despising, match-making mother of grown-up daughters, blind to everything but the glitter of the precious metals, with a calculating brain, and a heart petrified to a nether millstone hardness by the lessons and experiences of this pleasant civilized world of ours? Possible? Nothing more certain.

Next day's news broke down cruelly some of Mrs. Ochter's self-comforting conclusions, for more authentic intelligence came from the battle region; and was not Gertrude delighted to be able to keep to Esther's couch-side and whisper,—

“Not dead; the list has come, dear Esther; only severely wounded!”

Yes; the newspaper's correspondent had rashly slain Stapleton, captain of Buffadars, when he had but fainted from loss of blood. All the rest of his story was correct, and excited much approbation of the hero, from all who did not know his treachery to Mrs. Ochter. The report of it spread wide, seeing that no Cross of Victoria had been moulded in those days. It got to London even, and into the columns

of the *Versicolor*, that mighty quotidian whose voice shakes thrones; and the quotidian took it all over England, and to the breakfast-table of a grim old gentleman who dwelt, rich and childless, in a large antique-fashioned house, in the midst of a noble domain, yclept Staple Park, on the slopes of Pendle Hill. This old gentleman read the story twice with great eagerness, and then rang the bell for ancient hench-men to come and hear it also. Who could have thought that his scapegrace nephew, one of that poor, proud, scattered Staple Fells pack, too, would ever have come to so much good! But here it was in black and white, beyond all question, and lucky it was for the well-hacked captain that the *Versicolor*, in publishing this episode of the Sub-Loll campaign, was condescending enough to pay a compliment to the old blood of the Lancashire Stapletons.

Staple Fells, the reader has been told long ago, and has probably forgotten, was an old, utterly broken-down holding; but Staple Park was rich and flourishing. Fells and Park had been quarrelling with each other for the best part of two centuries.

Fells melted its plate for Charles the First, but Park, in those days poor and trading, joined Oliver and helped to break and incurably discomfit Rupert's Cavalry at Naseby. Park was then endowed with all Fells' possessions, which ungrateful Charles Secundus could not be at the trouble of restoring to the rightful Tory owner; and from that time onwards the trees sank lower and lower every year, until, as we saw, Stapleton's father was reduced to purchase with his votes a commission for his son, while Staple Park waxed wealthier, and watched the degradation of the other branch with hereditary satisfaction.

Severely wounded but not killed was our Stapleton by the enemy's yataghans. Taken to the rear, and compelled to sacrifice his right arm to Æsculapius, he struggled away from the grave vigorously, and was sent home with a batch of maimed heroes; not by Calcutta, for certain prudential reasons which will at once occur to the discerning reader. Landed in England, he was seized by an eager old gentleman, who had been for some time on the watch for him, and carried off triumphant to Staple Park, the

portals of which house in his younger days he had never been permitted to cross. At his own birth-place he would have found only desolation.

Esther quickly recovered from that betraying swoon of hers, the cause of which that politic matron, Mrs. Ochter, was wise enough never to allude to. All she could learn in future of her desperate lover was from the newspapers, which told her that he had gone to England. His name was never mentioned, except in certain secret conferences between the sisters, the youngest of whom, just at the time the earliest rhododendron unfolded its crimson corolla to the sun, had a happy tale of her own to tell, mamma hearing it not unwillingly. It was arranged that after another year Gertrude, for all her freckled pertness, should go to Vernon Lodge the vicar's wife. No secret being made of this, was Mr. Gregorian astonished or otherwise to find that in the season ensuing his betrothal his choir of lady psalmists was a dead failure? that he received no more of those gorgeous broiderments of skilful work-womanship, which, the year before, ever so many taper blue-veined lady-fingers wove and worked for his

church and for himself; that his proposals for a charitable bazaar were received with great coldness; that he was never asked again for copies of his sweet sermons; that he was, in fact, a fallen and a neglected man? He was astonished, and perhaps somewhat hurt. Poor padre! he may have muttered to himself, like Hood's shirt-stitcher,—

“ Oh! woman has never a soul to save,
If this be Christian work.”

But then had he not ample compensation in this happy-hearted, dark-eyed girl, fast changing into a graceful, gentle woman? Wretchedest, silliest emptiest of padres, if he had not!

Mrs. Ochter, putting full trust in time, silence, and separation—remedies, we are told, but haply may not all of us believe, for the direst calamities and griefs which can befall the sons and daughters of men—began to look forward impatiently to what the coming season might bring. Was not Esther as captivating as ever? Was she not certain to attract as much admiration as in the preceding year? Louisa had not improved at all. After her return to Paharnauth with Henry, she had at once taken

to her old ways, except that she did now hide her unceasing pining for aunt Sleigh's cottage. Indian habits and modes afforded no such occupation for her, as she had long ago fixed for herself. Was it because of her plain face that she had devoted her life to the cottages and the hungry firesides of the poor, and that she now longed to be amongst them again? This is too harsh a supposition to be entertained, is it not? Mamma gave up trying to understand her.

CHAPTER XI.

FINL

To lie under the green shade, say of a lime-tree in midsummer in England, scenting the fragrance of its slender yellow blossom, listening to the musical hum of hives full of bees busy in the midst of it, looking out coolly at the hot sunshine, and over a landscape of green and yellow, spreading far before one, sprinkled with squat village churches, and red factory chimneys, seems to people, considering it 15,000 miles off, not an unpleasant occupation. Judging from the expression of his face, this Stapleton, Captain of Buffadars, lying under such circumstances with an open letter beside him on the grass appears to enjoy it very much. The enemy's yataghans have relieved him of his right arm; but how much have they given him in place of it? A grim, childless, wealthy uncle, who hath sworn that the line shall not die out, who would not hear

of his going a maimed soldier to India any more—who insisted upon hearing of his debts and difficulties, and upon ridding him of the same—who, seeing him still clouded inquired further, and heard at last of the lady in the case.

The old gentleman, having several excellent connections in his eye for this heir of his, would have put the lady out of the case altogether; but this our captain would not hear of, not for all the Staple Parks and their belongings in England. So that at last he was duly empowered by this uncle, to write two letters, one to Mrs. Ochter, the other, enclosed in the first, to Esther. The replies to which our Stapleton has just read, and most gratifying he has found them. He will return to India once more, but only to bring away a bride. Mrs. Ochter will prefer to remain in India to look after her properties, to see Gertrude happily married. Louisa will accompany Esther as far as London, but will then go straight to aunt Sleigh's cottage, and astound everybody by marrying a curate with sixty pounds a year (increased after twenty years to eighty pounds), and will declare herself extremely happy.

Lony Ochter did not rise rapidly, because he said he had no talent for statistics; but his friends said no man could rise who allowed his wife to expound Christian truths, and to entertain missionaries of the most rabid description, together with their dusky flocks. He would not attempt to damp his wife's fervour: it came cheap: and as young Henries and Floras trooped into the world pretty regularly, economy was desirable. Flora never returned to Paharnauth, and she spoke always severely of the vanities of the place.

Young Budlee, whose regiment, greatly to its indignation, was kept in reserve during the Sub-Loll campaign, came, I regret to say, to the most decided grief. When he rejoined, he was received with unexpected cordiality, which was rather beyond his understanding. The past seemed to have been forgotten—Coventry vanished out of sight. He was not a little pleased at this, and made a vow of extreme caution, that he would not touch a cue or a card for many a day—not that he saw any likelihood of his being objected to by his brother officers as a partner or an adversary. He gradually

relaxed his resolution and played now and then, not high, but certainly with success. One night after a quiet dinner, he was playing whist with three not over sober companions, the stakes were for a trivial sum, and none of the players, excepting himself, took as much interest in the game as they did in chat and cheroots. Young Budlee always took interest in the game, and so much so on this particular occasion, that he did not notice, on his right and on his left, the senior major and the senior captain of the —th standing, watching the play in silence. The odd trick was being played for; his partner and he won it in a run. Budlee was triumphantly scoring up his treble, when the major tapped him on the shoulder and whispered,—

“I don’t wish to disgrace you and the regiment publicly. Go to your quarters, Mr. Budlee, and consider yourself under arrest.”

The subaltern could not but rise and go. A court of inquiry sat, and after due interval, orders came for a general court-martial to assemble to try Lieutenant Edward Budlee of the —th regiment on the charge, in short, of cheating at cards. He

had revoked three times in one deal, so said his accusers. He was tried accordingly, and, to the astonishment of all who didn't know him, sentenced to be cashiered. *Cartouche jaune*, nothing less.

Great indignation was felt at the time, throughout the army, about the whole business. "If a man were to be tried for a mistake like this, nobody could feel safe;" there was a pretty general feeling that Budlee was a martyr. The indignant army, however, knew nothing of the case beyond the printed charge. "Previous convictions," may not be brought against an officer, but previous prejudices bear hard upon him; and there was not a member of Budlee's Court, who had not heard long ago of Budlee's *écarté* and billiard feats. "Impartially tried," as the phrase goes, he was, and the sentence was *Cartouche jaune*. Under the circumstances, I believe, as did all who knew him, that no less punishment could have been awarded; and so he was turned loose upon the world, deserted and disowned: his father promised him some small monthly allowance, provided he

never saw his face again; the unhappy wretch hid himself in the bazar of some large cantonment, and finished his career with the brandy bottle. No other resource for him that I know of.

Colonel Budlee held on with his regiment for many years, declining "to go," for any bonus that could be offered him. It was said by his friends, that after Gertrude Ochter's marriage, he proposed for mother Ochter, and was refused. This I am inclined to doubt. He went to decay very rapidly after his son's disgrace. He became gouty, deaf and blind, but still drew and spent his command allowance valiantly, fine old soldier that he was!

It would be unjust not to mention that Mr. McCuddum fulfilled all the high expectations of his admirers; he rose quickly to some of the highest offices, but through stress of liver he was compelled to leave the country early. Some of his papers, for instance his reports on the "suppression of Polyandry amongst the Peroo Tribes," on the "Fusion of the Hindoo, Mussulman, and English Codes," and his last Minute on the "necessity of discouraging European settlers, especially

in the Hills," are studied to this day by the enthusiastic competition-wallah.

Mrs. McCuddum, née Lydia Gidding, was not popular. She was afflicted with a desire for more select society than Indian stations generally afford, and complained very much of the low tone prevalent amongst the people she was compelled to associate with. Considering her position before marriage, it was but natural that she should give herself "airs." She refused to have her younger sisters out, to her mother's astonishment; but she allowed the poor widow fifty rupees a month, which was very generous. It was very generally believed that Mrs. McCuddum ruled her husband much more severely than was necessary, and that she took great delight in pulling him up sharp, and dragging the bit about in his mouth before strangers. It is not easy to understand this, for he was not a flirting man.

When Mrs. Ochter, full of years and honours, dropped into the grave, Mrs. Gregorian and Mrs. Ochter junior divided the beautiful furniture of Beauclerc Cottage between them. The house, thus

dismantled, went quickly to wreck, and I believe I am safe in saying, that there is not a trace of it to be found in Paharnauth at this day. Only the snow peaks, and the gray ridges, are permanent in this world of change.

THE END.

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